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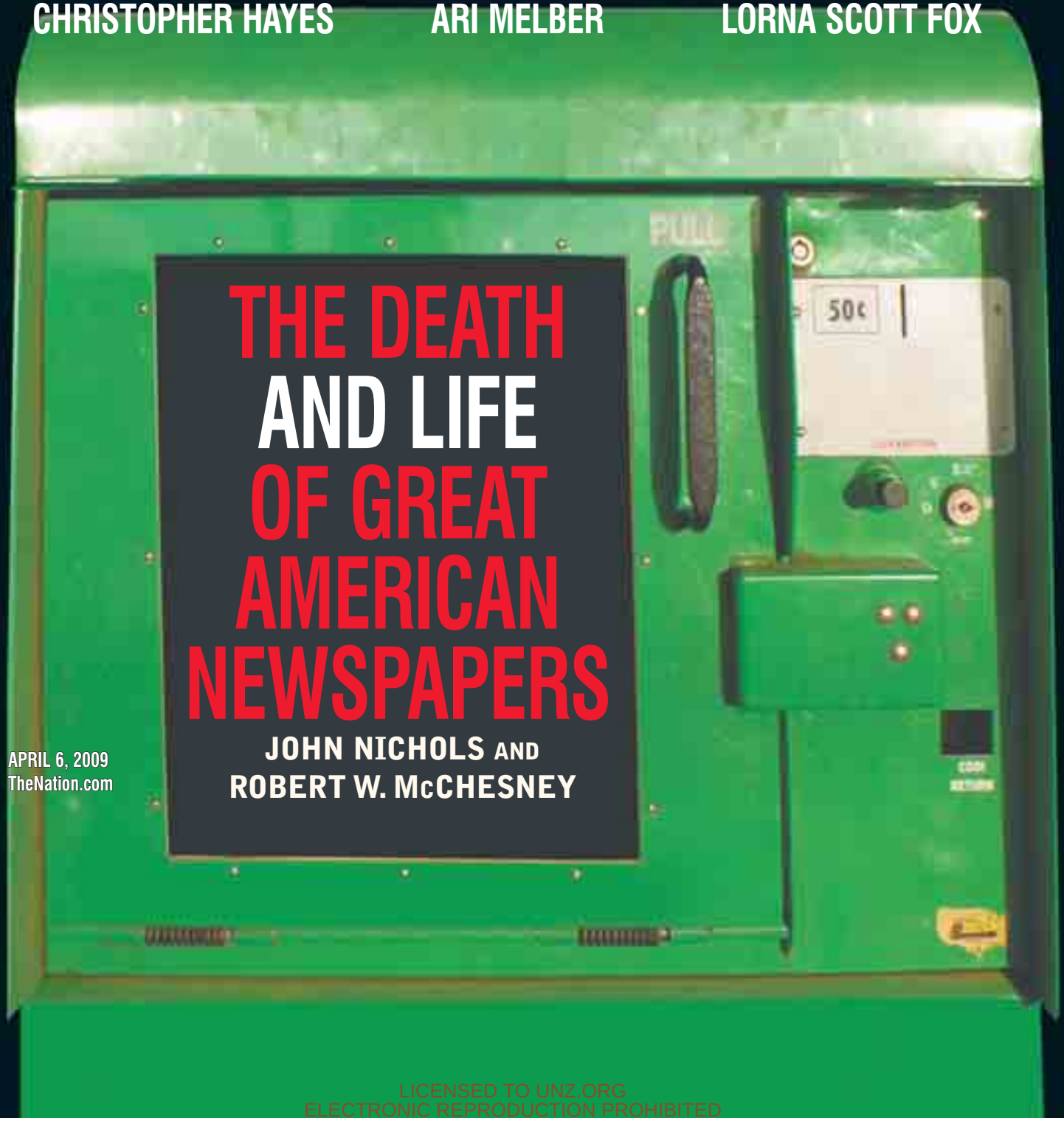

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

JOHN NICHOLS AND
ROBERT W. McCHESNEY

APRIL 6, 2009
TheNation.com

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Letters

UNITE HERE—The Great Debate

San Francisco

The internal union debate within UNITE HERE is no "distraction," as characterized by David Moberg in "Unions, Disunited" [March 9]. It's about union democracy, upholding union standards and organizing millions of new members.

The Hotel Workers Rising (HWR) campaign of 2004–06, which Moberg mentions, is a great example. Contrary to UNITE HERE general president Bruce Raynor's assertion, our union has organized more hotel workers (seventy-five new hotels) in the past three years than in the previous five, in addition to winning the best contract in years.

In 2004 thousands of San Francisco hotel workers went on strike, eventually broke a fifty-three-day lockout and endured two years without a contract to win the right to organize through card check—all on behalf of workers they didn't even know. Moreover, during HWR, tens of thousands more union members in eight cities across North America demanded, fought for and achieved card-check rights in 2006. If that campaign was not about organizing, Raynor evidently does not know what is.

Mike Casey, *president*
UNITE HERE Local 2

Iraq's Refugees: The Other Side of War

Scotts Valley, Calif.

Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Perle and all members of Congress who voted to approve the invasion of Iraq and who support the continued occupation thereof should be required to read aloud before an international tribunal the entire article by Ann Jones, "Iraq's Invisible Refugees," in your March 9 issue.

Howard F. Sosbee

Shepherdstown, W.V.

Ann Jones's "Iraq's Invisible Refugees" was heartbreaking. *The Nation* could do another service by informing readers about the condition of Iraqi refugees who have been resettled in the United States. Jones asks, "What is to be done?" One answer might be to support resettlement agencies working here to help refugees (Catholic Charities, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, World Relief and International Rescue Committee, among others). These refugees are now our neighbors.

Chris Morehouse

The Life Cycle of the Mall

Grants Pass, Ore.

Re "The Parable of the Shopping Mall," by Alexander Cockburn ["Beat the Devil," March 9]. Cockburn is right about the life cycle of malls. When the mall in Eureka, California, was built, I said, correctly as it turned out, that someday it would be a bunch of boarded-up stores. But one feature is still a drawing card: older folks use the mall for walking exercise. It is out of the rain and safe.

But go up the hill to Pearson's Mall. It went through all the stages, and is now in a later phase: the boarded-up stores are mostly filled. A big discount grocery store draws people from all over the county. Some stores in the rear have been turned into a dancing school, gymnastics studio and other places for kids, exactly as Cockburn suggests.

Times change. Humboldt County is no longer a lumber capital. With mild weather summer and winter and better weather due to global warming, retirees are moving in. If you want to live in a small town with beautiful Victorians and two colleges with all the culture and intellectual stimulation they bring, that's the place. And you still have an aging mall to walk in when it rains.

Andrew Montgomery

Cockburn Replies

Petrolia, Calif.

All true, except—alas—for the fact that the naturally occurring global warming

(continued on page 24)

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Don't Bail on EFCA

As rage against AIG, the recipient of $170 billion in bailout funds, roiled the nation, CEO Edward Liddy insisted that he simply cannot "retain the best and brightest" without paying $165 million in bonuses, many above $1 million, to employees in the company's financial products division. And what did this brain trust do to merit such perks? They helped wreck the global economy and destroyed prosperity for millions. Meanwhile, across the class gap, American workers who actually make real goods, provide real services and create real wealth continue to toil for declining wages, with little to no job security, health insurance or retirement benefits.

EDITORIAL

With such (perverse) incentives, it's no wonder that concentrations of wealth in America approach Gilded Age levels; nor is it any mystery why we're facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. America has become a nation of Wal-Mart wages for the many and private jets for the few. Wage stagnation has been so severe that working Americans extracted disastrous amounts of equity from their homes and ran up credit card bills just to maintain their standard of living. In large part, this untenable class gap widened because private sector unionization, now just 7.6 percent, was crushed as a counterforce to corporate greed.

Fortunately, Congress has a historic opportunity to address this root cause of the recession, not by clawing back AIG's bonuses (though that would be just) but by passing the Employee Free Choice Act. Reintroduced March 10, EFCA would make it far easier for workers to form a union and negotiate a contract, free of the worst forms of employer intimidation. But key senators have shrunk from their support for the bill, and the administration has yet to make a full-court press for EFCA.

Unquestionably, the White House and the Senate are under a relentless assault from a powerhouse opposition, led by Wal-Mart, the US Chamber of Commerce and the Heritage Foundation, which hired a fellow three years ago to issue weekly white papers on the dangers of union power. In a particularly unseemly twist, major bailout recipients AIG, Bank of America ($45 billion) and Citigroup ($45 billion) have joined the attack team.

But the opposition's propaganda campaign is built on canards. They claim that EFCA will do away with secret ballot elections; but it merely shifts the choice of how to pick a union from management to workers. They claim that increased unionization will destroy jobs; but countries like Britain, Sweden and Ireland have historically had high union density and low unemployment. Make no mistake: the corporate class is fighting to preserve Wal-Mart America—its right to pay poverty wages, to forbid meal breaks, to force "associates" to work off the clock and to terrorize anyone who breathes the word "union." It well knows that the tiny staff at the Labor Department can't stop systemic labor-law violations, and even the mighty Treasury can't rein in executive pay. Labor unions just might do both. They are not only watchdogs for workers' rights; they facilitate the redistribution of wealth.

In this climate of crisis, it would be foolish for Democrats to retreat from the one piece of legislation that could rebalance this disastrous economic formula. Moreover, as Karl Rove no doubt knows, a rebounding labor movement increases the odds for winning a progressive majority in Congress for years to come. A Democratic surrender on EFCA would be a moral outrage—and political self-sabotage.

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News & Analysis

Barbara Crossette: Pakistan in turmoil

Roberto Lovato: El Salvador's new president

New Column: Ange Mlinko on language

Blogs: Leslie Savan on CBS's meltdown

Your Letters: Express yourself!

Which Side Are You On?

100 DAYS

Legislative fights in Washington rarely break down neatly along class lines. Often, the coalitions on either side of an issue are unwieldy and eclectic, with one sector or industry battling another. The notable exception is the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would reform a broken labor elections system, making it easier (one might say possible) for workers to unionize.

On March 10 the bill was reintroduced in the House and the Senate, ushering in the final act in a six-year legislative battle that has become the most bruising and intense in Washington, one that—literally—pits Capital against Labor.

For the GOP the politics are straightforward. Woven into the DNA of the modern conservative is opposition to unions and unionism of any kind. Defeating the bill has become a kind of jobs program for right-wing hacks: no fewer than sixteen groups are raising money, mobilizing constituents, running ads and lobbying senators to kill it.

But for a Democratic Party that for several decades has awkwardly attempted to be the party of both business and labor, it's a very difficult circle to square. "It comes at a bad time," says a wealthy, business-friendly Democratic donor. "[Democrats] are blaming bankers, blaming lots of people, and it sounds like these people are anti-business.... A lot of us warned the guys working for Obama that [EFCA] would be a problem. They said, Don't overreact to this—it's a long way from becoming law, blah, blah, blah."

In this particular fight, class solidarity—if I may use a phrase that has long since gone out of fashion—seems to trump partisan loyalties.

Obama supporter and advocate of progressive taxation Warren Buffett has come out against the legislation. And according to that wealthy Democrat I talked with, he's not alone: "I think a lot of Democratic donors are downright pissed off," he told me. His fellow well-heeled Democratic donors, he said, are complaining that "this is the danger of having Democrats control Congress and the White House." The head of a large progressive nonprofit echoed the point. The act, he said, "happened to come up a few times" recently with donors. He was surprised by how intense their opposition is. "The passion of it threw me off a bit," he added.

Part of the source of these tensions is the fact that the disgraced financial sector (which increasingly leans Democratic in its donations) has largely thrown its weight behind opposing the bill—despite the fact that these same businesses are being kept on life support by the government. A Citibank retail analyst downgraded Wal-Mart's stock for fear that the bill would pass; the next day she hosted an "informational" conference call featuring a representative from the US Chamber of Commerce, who spent the entire call warning darkly about EFCA. (After the Huffington Post broke the news of the anti-EFCA call in mid-March, Citi hurriedly hosted a call with members of the United Food and Commercial Workers.)

"This is the biggest battle between labor and corporations in this country since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947," the AFL-

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CIO's organizing director, Stewart Acuff, told me. What makes the battle especially intense is that while both sides have attempted to shape public opinion, polls show that the issue doesn't amount to even a blip on voters' radar. A recent poll found majority support for a bill that would make it easier to organize, but only 12 percent of respondents said they were following the EFCA bill "very closely."

That means victory will ultimately come not from shaping public opinion but from pressuring the handful of swing senators. Each side is ferociously organizing constituents in those senators' states.

A few of these red state Democrats—in a kind of parody of squishy centrism—have hinted they'd like to find some legislative compromise. "This legislation is not perfect," Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor said recently. "And while I have been supportive in the past, I will consider amendments to make it better if and when it is considered by the Senate." Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson said he thinks that "there'll be a major effort to modify it before it ever comes up for consideration, and I'll have to take a look and see what it is then." Some senators have floated compromises, such as extending the amount of time management would have to negotiate a first contract before binding arbitration.

If Senate Democrats think an amendment will give them political cover, they're fooling themselves. Just ask big business. Speaking on the Citi conference call, Glenn Spencer of the Chamber of Commerce said, "There is no amendment you could make to this bill to make it acceptable. From top to bottom it's a bad piece of legislation. You'd have to start with scrapping this bill."

Labor also sees EFCA as a black and white issue and is eager to take away the middle ground. Acuff says the fundamental

Noted.

PAGING JON STEWART: Of course it was fun to watch the meltdown smackdown where *The Daily Show*'s **Jon Stewart** grilled CNBC corporate cheerleader **Jim Cramer** for pitching "snake oil as vitamin tonic." Stewart was doing what journalists are supposed to do, calling out a "business news" huckster with the admonition: "Listen, you knew what the banks were doing and yet were touting it for months and months—the entire network was. So now to pretend that this was some sort of crazy, once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that nobody could have seen coming was disingenuous at best and criminal at worst."

You could almost hear the collective cry of "Yes! Finally!" ACORN hailed Stewart for "taking on the banks, speculators and financial commentators who caused this economic crisis" and especially for saying it was "insane" to blame mortgage holders. **Adam Green**, **Stephanie Taylor** and the **Progressive Change Campaign Committee** launched a campaign to "Fix CNBC!" with a call to hire hosts who actually know something about economics.

But let's not stop with CNBC. What was so refreshing about Stewart's interview was the unrelenting, unapologetic demand for personal and institutional accountability for the commentators who threw gasoline on the fire. But what about the guys who started the fire? During the Great Depression, Congress called bankers and brokers—including **J.P. Morgan** himself—before investigative committees and forced them to come clean. That's how legislators figured out how to regulate the speculators and protect working Americans from the robber barons' greed seventy-five years ago.

Vermont Senator **Bernie Sanders** is pushing for a new accountability moment, proposing "a major investigation into what caused the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression." Specifically, Sanders is asking Senate Majority Leader **Harry Reid** to expand the Congressional TARP bailout review to include investigating how the financial crisis started in the first place. Maybe they should appoint Stewart as special counsel. JOHN NICHOLS

IRAQ AT 6: Cost of war: **$656 billion** in funds allocated (National Priorities Project).

Documented civilian deaths: between **91,121** and **99,500** (IraqBodyCount.org).

Estimated Iraqi deaths due to the US invasion: **1,320,110** (JustForeignPolicy.org, based on data from Iraq Body Count and a 2006 *Lancet* study).

Iraqi civilians killed in February 2009: **346** (including 11 children).

US casualties: **4,259** deaths; **31,131** wounded in action.

US troops deployed to Iraq since 2003: **513,000**; deployed more than once: **197,000**; deployed three or more times: **53,000**.

US soldiers who committed suicide in January 2009: as many as **24**, the highest monthly total since the Army started keeping those stats in 1980.

Iraqi unemployment rate: **18 percent**; for men ages 15–29: **28 percent**.

Iraqi female labor force participation: **17 percent**.

Journalists killed in Iraq: **138**.

Estimated number of Iraqis displaced since 2003: **5 million**, nearly **20 percent** of the total population.

Iraqi prison population: **15,100** in US custody; **35,000** in Iraqi custody.

Average hours of electricity per day in Iraq: **13.3**.

POPULIST PUSH: Ohio Congresswoman **Marcy Kaptur**, a fierce critic of Wall Street, has joined the House Populist Caucus. So, too, has Texas Congressman **Lloyd Doggett**, a Budget Committee member who says taxpayers deserve "more accountability, more transparency and a better return on their substantial investment" from bailed-out banks. Kaptur and Doggett vociferously opposed last fall's bailout bill. JOHN NICHOLS

IN MEMORIAM: Ann Epstein, *The Nation*'s business manager for almost twenty years at 72 Fifth Avenue, died on March 6. Ann was known for her stern but motherly demeanor, her ability to pinch a penny till Lincoln cried for mercy (she doled out blue pencils to the copy department one at a time), her prizewinning needlepoint and her cheesecake, which by popular demand graced many a *Nation* party.

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question is, "Are you for unions or are you against unions? If you're against this legislation, you're against unions. You can't say you're for unions if you don't think workers should be able to form unions without fear of retaliation."

Sometime in the next few months, every Democratic elected official is going to have to answer a very old question that in a post-meltdown world is newly resonant: Which side are you on?

CHRISTOPHER HAYES

AIG Lights a Fire

The infamous letter from AIG CEO Edward Liddy to Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner—the one in which he informs the good secretary that whatever the administration's preference might be to the contrary, the company will be paying $165 million in bonuses to its financial products division—is destined to be studied years from now as the perfect text for this strange moment in American capitalism. Facially supplicant yet substantively defiant, its rhetorical posture is that of a bank robber who calls the teller "ma'am" before asking her calmly to put the money in the bag. "On the one hand, all of us at AIG recognize the environment in which we operate and the remonstrations of our President for a more restrained system of compensation for executives," Liddy writes. (Nice touch, the use of "remonstrations" to describe the president's attempts to rein in Wall Street with moral suasion.) "On the other hand, we cannot attract and retain the best and brightest talent to lead and staff the AIG businesses—which are now being operated principally on behalf of the American taxpayers—if employees believe that their compensation is subject to continued and arbitrary adjustment by the U.S. Treasury." This is the language of someone who has sized up what an organizer would call "the power relations" and believes they are balanced in his favor.

COMMENT

The question is, Was his calculation correct? At this writing, Liddy is appearing before Congress, sitting in the proverbial hot seat. On Capitol Hill there is unanimous agreement that the proposed bonuses are an intolerable insult to taxpayers. They certainly are. But one learns to mistrust unanimity in Washington. There's something vaguely redolent of the earmark foolishness in the dramatic expressions of anger from elected officials—what might be called the Law of Small Numbers. When it comes to money, trillions of dollars is a statistic, but $165 million is an outrage. Then there's the fact that much of Washington, including, sadly, the Obama administration, was complicit in setting the stage for this drama. Ron Wyden and Olympia Snowe co-sponsored an amendment to the recovery act that would have required TARP recipients to pay back bonuses in excess of $100,000 or face tax penalties. It was mysteriously removed from the final bill just before passage. Geithner and Larry Summers, meanwhile, have both reportedly worked internally to water down statutory limitations on executive compensation for bailed-out firms.

I'd bet against AIG's financial products traders keeping their bonuses: public outrage is running too high. But then what? The power imbalance is the fundamental problem, and it remains. At a *Nation*-sponsored panel on the financial crisis in New York City on March 6, an audience member asked, "Why aren't people in the streets?" There are a number of answers: the capital-L, to-the-streets Left is withered. The absolute level of privation doesn't begin to approach the mass starvation and immiseration of the Depression. The whole goddamned thing is so complicated, no one's quite sure what to make of it.

Perhaps, though, AIG overplayed its hand. Perhaps it has catalyzed something. A coalition of progressive groups including MoveOn, SEIU and ACORN has announced Take Back the Economy protests at banks and corporate headquarters across the country on March 19. Another group of activists have set up a website, A New Way Forward (anewwayforward.org), to facilitate the organization of grassroots protests in favor of bank nationalization on April 11. Their slogan—Nationalize. Reorganize. Decentralize.—represents the first attempt to distill the intimidating complexity of the financial rescue into a straightforward popular demand. And power, as Frederick Douglass so sagely observed, concedes nothing without a demand.

CHRISTOPHER HAYES

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

The Best and the Brightest

We cannot attract and retain the best and the brightest talent to lead and staff the AIG businesses… if employees believe their compensation is subject to continued and arbitrary adjustment.

—AIG chair Edward M. Liddy, defending the payment of $165 million in bonuses to employees of a firm that has required $170 billion in government bailout funds

Yes, billions they lost in one quarter.
This bothers them not in the slightest.
They still want a bonus for failure,
For they are the best and the brightest.

You'd think, with the damage they'd done, they'd
Apologize, at their politest.
But they want a bonus for failure,
For they are the best and the brightest.

No bonus? Well, then they might leave, though
The job market's shrunk to its tightest,
And Burger King now is competing
To hire the best and the brightest.

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Bush Law Continued

COMMENT

Most of us have a favorite image from the inauguration of President Obama. Mine shows soldiers at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base replacing George W. Bush's picture with a portrait of the new president. A day later, Obama ordered that Guantánamo be closed within a year, signaling that his administration would take a stance on terrorism very different from his predecessor's. Since then, however, he has taken several actions suggesting that the differences may be less marked than that first day implied. Certainly there have been significant improvements in US policy, particularly Washington's approach to international law. But disturbingly, the Obama administration has continued the Bush administration's attempts to shield illegal exercises of executive authority from judicial review.

The Obama administration's ambivalent approach was perhaps most evident in its March 13 announcement that it was abandoning the Bush label of "enemy combatant" for those held at Guantánamo. But at the same time, in a legal brief filed in a Guantánamo detention case, the administration advanced a new definition of who may be detained—which was immediately criticized by human rights groups as differing only marginally from that used by President Bush.

In fact, there are some significant shifts in this approach to detention. Obama's administration rests its authority squarely on Congress's Authorization to Use Military Force Against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, abandoning George W. Bush's claim to inherent executive authority. And it insists that the power to detain must be interpreted in light of law-of-war principles, displaying a refreshing desire to conform its actions to international law.

Critics correctly point out that the principal definitional difference is that where Bush claimed the right to detain all supporters of Al Qaeda or the Taliban, Obama asserts the right to detain only those who provided "substantial support" to these groups. "Substantial" is admittedly a dangerously vague term. It would be far better if Congress set forth in explicit terms who may be detained and under what circumstances. But the Obama administration argues that its detention authority should be framed by reference to the laws of war, which authorize detention, during traditional wars, of those who provide substantial support to enemy forces. If the administration and the courts interpret that term narrowly, it may turn out to be a more significant difference than it first appears. Bush's lawyers infamously told a judge that a woman who unwittingly donated to a charity that turned out to be an Al Qaeda front could be detained as an enemy combatant. The Obama administration has not only rejected that view but has agreed that its detention authority must be limited by the laws of war.

More troubling, however, is the administration's stance on several other lawsuits. In all of them the bottom line is that executive wrongdoing in connection with the conflict with Al Qaeda should be shielded from judicial scrutiny. The administration has told courts that lawsuits challenging the Bush administration's warrantless wiretapping and extraordinary rendition programs must be dismissed because they involve "state secrets." On this theory, the executive can avoid any judicial review of criminal and unconstitutional wrongdoing simply by declaring its wrongs a secret.

The Obama administration has also adhered to the Bush administration's contention that the right of habeas corpus does not extend to detainees at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan. The military holds some 600 detainees at Bagram on grounds similar to those it uses to hold prisoners at Guantánamo—and with even fewer rights. Once the Supreme Court said that Guantánamo incarcerations would be subject to judicial oversight, the military simply stopped shipping its captives there, diverting them to Bagram instead. Should the executive branch be permitted to avoid accountability for its detentions simply by incarcerating them in Afghanistan rather than in Cuba?

And in a case seeking damages for torture and other abuse at Guantánamo, the Obama administration has argued that Guantánamo detainees have no constitutional rights to due process, so that even if they were tortured, no constitutional rights were violated. The Supreme Court's ruling last year that the constitutional right of habeas corpus extends to Guantánamo rested on its determination that there is nothing impracticable about extending such rights there. The same reasoning would fully support the extension of due process rights—yet the administration simply says no.

In the same lawsuit, the administration argues further that even if due process protects Guantánamo detainees, suits for damages against federal officials for violating detainees' rights should be dismissed because the suits involve matters of national security and foreign policy that are the "exclusive prerogative" of the political branches—as if the Supreme Court had not already decided three cases directly challenging the legality of Guantánamo detentions.

To sum up: in the one area where it cannot avoid judicial oversight—because the Supreme Court has ruled that Guantánamo detainees have a constitutional right to challenge their detentions via habeas corpus—the Obama administration has advanced a new legal theory for detaining the enemy that may, depending on how it is applied, mark a significant improvement over President Bush's.

But the unifying theme in the rest of the cases is that the courts should back off—no matter how illegally the executive has acted. President Bush undertook a full-scale assault on the courts, on international law and on the rule of law. President Obama, by contrast, has abandoned claims of executive supremacy and shown encouraging signs of a willingness to abide by international law. However, his resistance to judicial oversight and constitutional constraint may render his promises unenforceable in many settings. In the end, Obama seems to say that we, and the courts, should trust him. But we have learned the hard way that trust is not sufficient—the rule of law demands accountability.

DAVID COLE

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Alexander Cockburn

NATO: Still Mission-Creeping at 60

We're heading toward the sixtieth anniversary of NATO. There's to be a ceremony on April 3-4 in Strasbourg and Kehl, the latter being the German town facing Strasbourg on the east side of the Rhine. Sarkozy of France and Merkel of Germany will meet and embrace, in symbolic affirmation of Unity Restored, after divisive conflicts now buried in the mists of time. I'm not sure what theatrical events are being planned to symbolize this celebration of Gallo-Teutonic entente, perhaps some flotilla on the mighty Rhine, with Sarko as a latter-day Mark Antony and buxom Merkel as Cleopatra.

To give vibrancy to the event, Sarkozy has just formally brought France back into NATO's "integrated command." Charles de Gaulle, a leader who looks better with every passing decade, took France out in 1966 as a rebuke to American domination of the alliance. No doubt there'll soon be an institutional shift back to Paris by NATO personnel, wearied of *moules frites* and *waterzooi*.

You can be sure there will be gale-force gusts of bombast about the NATO alliance's historic role as Europe's mighty shield and buckler, guarantor of its freedoms against "aggression," thus perpetuating sixty years of humbug. There was never the slightest chance of the Soviet Union and its auxiliaries in the Warsaw Pact rolling west in the prospective onslaught luridly evoked by Winston Churchill in a speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in March 1949. Churchill raised the specter of the Mongol "hordes" that had menaced Europe 700 years before, heading home only when the Great Khan died. "They never returned," rumbled the old faker, "till now."

Having borne almost the entire burden of crushing Hitler's armies on the Eastern Front and having suffered appalling casualties in so doing, the Soviet Union was in no condition to invade Western Europe. This didn't impede mad Western scenarios of the sort that threat-inflators routinely issued down the decades until the very moment the Soviet Union collapsed.

Armored Cavalry Journal quavered in 1947 that "Russia could probably invade and occupy the whole of Western Europe against resistance from present American, British and French troops in a matter of 48 hours." Driven by Truman's 1948 arms scare, NATO lumbered into being in 1949, ratifying dominance of US arms procurement for the alliance, internal custodial sentry duty against any slide to the left by one or other of the European allies, establishment of West Germany as an independent state and US control of the nuclear forces deemed necessary to counter nonexistent Soviet conventional superiority. Year upon year nothing dented the endless flow of "threat assessments" powering new weapons systems, "theater nuclear" and "counterforce" doctrines that kept the arms factories running at full tilt and spawned a vast subculture of think tanks, expert panels and lobby shops.

Then, suddenly, it was all over. NATO's formal purpose evaporated. The Soviet Union collapsed. Without delay NATO burgeoned into exactly what its left detractors had always said its essential function had been from the start, a US-dominated political and military alliance aimed at encircling Russia and acting as enforcer for larger US imperial strategy. NATO's onslaughts on the former Yugoslavia duly followed.

In April we can expect NATO's leaders to proclaim a new "strategic concept" to define the organization's mission for the twenty-first century, doubtless including its availability to battle global warming, latest in the long line of imaginary threats, conjured up to elicit larger budgets, more weapons, new "missions" launched from the ramparts of Western capital.

NATO doesn't need a new mission. It needs to disappear into the trash can of history along with the cold war that engendered it. Dragging myself through the transcripts of three sessions the Council on Foreign Relations devoted to Russian-American relations in January, I was astounded to see no less a personage than Richard Burt apparently hinting at this. Burt was the *New York Times* defense correspondent who followed Al Haig into the Reagan administration in 1981; he headed the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs at the State Department and later became ambassador to Germany. At a CFR session in January, Burt remarked that "NATO is at this point an organization either in search of a mission or an organization with too many missions" and "needs to kind of fundamentally go through a pretty deep review of what its core mission is." Then he remarked that there is "something that President Obama could do in one week, and that was announce that he was going to go to the Congress to drop Jackson-Vanik." George W. Bush promised this to Vladimir Putin, but nothing ever happened.

Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson wrote the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Reform Act of 1974 as part of his vain quest for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1976. Jackson was chasing the Jewish vote. The statute forbids extending "most-favored nation" status to countries with poor human rights records, particularly on emigration. Jackson is dead. Millions of Jews have emigrated from the former Soviet Union (including Avigdor Lieberman, in 1978). But like NATO, Jackson-Vanik lives on malignly, blocking Russia from permanent, unconditional "most-favored nation" status in trade. As the Russian Foreign Ministry remarked not so long ago, it is "one of the last anachronisms of the era of confrontation and distrust." (China, which by any standard has an awful human rights record, enjoys permanent normal trade relations with the United States.)

Antony and Cleopatra may enjoy each other amid the bathos and hypocrisy of NATO's April anniversary on the Rhine. But if Obama and his secretary of state wish to display any enthusiasm for constructive change in the twenty-first century, they could start by throwing Jackson-Vanik out the window. ■

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Katha Pollitt

Love Me, I'm a Conservative

Liberal blogger men are thrilled with the *New York Times*'s appointment of 29-year-old *Atlantic* blogger Ross Douthat to replace William Kristol on the op-ed page. Douthat is best known for his conservative Catholicism (abortion is murder, frozen embryos are children, contraception kills romance) and for *Grand New Party*, written with Reihan Salam, which argues that the Republican Party should appeal to lower-middle-class "Sam's Club voters" by supporting policies intended to shore up marriage, parenthood and work. Because what the party of big business wants most of all is to help working people live secure and prosperous lives. That's why it's spent the past three decades telling them their only problems were Hollywood, Harvard, Planned Parenthood and black people.

"Smart move," says Matt Yglesias. Ezra Klein and George Packer agree he's "brilliant." At TheNation.com, Chris Hayes calls it a "fantastic choice," and Eyal Press looks forward to "thoughtful commentary."

Right. Thoughtful commentary like this, on the female orgasm:

> You could spin this out further and point out that it also makes adaptive sense for women to have a certain amount of difficulty having orgasms, because then they're more likely to seek out a long-term monogamous partner who knows their body well, which in turn dovetails nicely with the general female interest in having only one partner, the better to keep that partner around when the children come along.

On those pesky WMDs:

> It goes without saying that [Saddam Hussein], too, is busy trying to acquire a nuclear bomb, to supplement his extensive collection of biological and chemical weaponry.

On "the business of embryo killing":

> Also, to the extent that pro-lifers do accept the current fertility-clinic culture as a given, I still think there's a worthwhile moral distinction to be drawn between "pointlessly" freezing the embryos left over from an attempt to have children, and just handing them over to be killed. Yes, a frozen embryo will probably be destroyed eventually, and the pro-life gesture involved in freezing it is probably just an empty gesture. But there's still a difference between a situation in which death is probable and a situation where it's inevitable….

On that whiny Michelle Obama:

> There are many sorts of populism, from the optimistic (think Reagan, or LBJ) to the angry and doom-ridden (think John Edwards). But a self-pitying populism, in which a Princeton-educated, upper-middle-class woman—or a wealthy woman, really; Michelle Obama earned roughly $400,000 in 2005—equates her own struggles to pay off her college loans with the woes of the working class seems like a remarkably unappealing variation on the theme.… Not that the upper middle class doesn't have its struggles too; God knows I whine to my friends about how hard I work from time to time. But it's mildly inappropriate to whinge about those struggles publicly, and extremely inappropriate to whine about them in the context of a political campaign. It's like having Judith Warner campaigning to be First Lady.

There's much more at *The Atlantic*—on gay sheep, the "vice" of masturbation, why "a little 'shaming' here and there isn't the worst response to sexual promiscuity" (well, no, the worst response would be a *lot* of shaming, as in stoning or "honor" murder or being sent to the Magdalene laundries). I haven't read his collected cyberworks, but even for a blogo-pundit, Douthat seems unusually averse to engaging with women intellectually, even on perennial topics like abortion and birth control, where you'd think we'd bring something missing to the table—like an interest in our health, well-being, happiness, longevity, pleasure and ability to have some control over our lives. Instead, he engages *Slate*'s Will Saletan on whether contraception would prevent enough abortions to make it worth expanding government funding. Douthat thinks not; but if abortion is murder, wouldn't preventing 12,000 of them (his misleadingly low figure) be quite an accomplishment? That's equivalent to nearly two-thirds of the 17,000 murders of born people in the United States every year. In his ongoing stem cell debate with Michael Kinsley, sometimes embryos are people, and sometimes they're counters in arguments that are really about sex, women and modern life. Contraception destroyed the working class! Curbing suburban sprawl is anti-family! Given his age and the long tenure of *Times* columnists, I could be facing a twice-weekly dose of this claptrap for the rest of my life. Depressing.

So who would I like to see in the Kristol slot? Actually, Kristol. I was livid when they gave him the job, but he was perfect: a dull, complacent apparatchik who set forth the Bush line in all its fact-free glory. His columns were like press releases—you could hardly remember them two minutes after reading them. But his presence on the page reminded readers that David Brooks is not really what Republicanism is all about. Frankly, though, I don't see why there must be two conservatives on the page. Does the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Times*'s national competition, have two liberals? That the *Times*, the closest thing we have to a liberal paper, cedes so much turf to the opposition, as progressive bloggers applaud, shows the truth of Robert Frost's quip that a liberal is someone so open-minded he won't take his own side in an argument. ■

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THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

The collapse of journalism threatens democracy itself—that's why we need a government rescue.

by JOHN NICHOLS AND ROBERT W. McCHESNEY

Communities across America are suffering through a crisis that could leave a dramatically diminished version of democracy in its wake. It is not the economic meltdown, although the crisis is related to the broader day of reckoning that appears to have arrived. The crisis of which we speak involves more than mere economics. Journalism is collapsing, and with it comes the most serious threat in our lifetimes to self-government and the rule of law as it has been understood here in the United States.

After years of neglecting signs of trouble, elite opinion-makers have begun in recent months to recognize that things have gone horribly awry. Journals ranging from *Time*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and *The New Republic* to the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* concur on the diagnosis: newspapers, as we have known them, are disintegrating and are possibly on the verge of extinction. *Time*'s Walter Isaacson describes the situation as having "reached meltdown proportions" and concludes, "It is now possible to contemplate a time in the near future when major towns will no longer have a newspaper and when magazines and network news operations will employ no more than a handful of reporters." A newspaper industry that still employs roughly 50,000 journalists—the vast majority of the remaining practitioners of the craft—is teetering on the brink.

Blame has been laid first and foremost on the Internet, for luring away advertisers and readers, and on the economic meltdown, which has demolished revenues and hammered debt-laden media firms. But for all the ink spilled addressing the dire circumstance of the ink-stained wretch, the understanding of what we can do about the crisis has been woefully inadequate. Unless we rethink alternatives and reforms, the media will continue to flail until journalism is all but extinguished.

Let's begin with the crisis. In a nutshell, media corporations, after running journalism into the ground, have determined that news gathering and reporting are not profit-making propositions. So they're jumping ship. The country's great regional dailies—the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*—are in bankruptcy. Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* recently closed down, ending daily newspaper competition in that city. The owners of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, reportedly losing $1 million a week, are threatening to shutter the paper, leaving a major city without a major daily newspaper. Big dailies in Seattle (the *Times*), Chicago (the *Sun-Times*) and Newark (the *Star-Ledger*) are reportedly near the point of folding, and smaller dailies like the *Baltimore Examiner* have already closed. The 101-year-old *Christian Science Monitor*, in recent years an essential source of international news and analysis, is folding its daily print edition. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* is scuttling its print edition and downsizing from a news staff of 165 to about twenty for its online-only incarnation. Whole newspaper chains—such as Lee Enterprises, the owner of large and medium-size publications that for decades have defined debates in Montana, Iowa and Wisconsin—are struggling as the value of stock shares falls below the price of a single daily paper. And the *New York Times* needed an emergency injection of hundreds of millions of dollars by Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim in order to stay afloat.

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Those are the headlines. Arguably uglier is the death-by-small-cuts of newspapers that are still functioning. Layoffs of reporters and closings of bureaus mean that even if newspapers survive, they have precious few resources for actually doing journalism. Job cuts during the first months of this year—300 at the *Los Angeles Times*, 205 at the *Miami Herald*, 156 at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 150 at the *Kansas City Star*, 128 at the *Sacramento Bee*, 100 at the *Providence Journal*, 100 at the *Hartford Courant*, ninety at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, thirty at the *Wall Street Journal* and on and on—suggest that this year will see far more positions eliminated than in 2008, when almost 16,000 were lost. Even *Doonesbury*'s Rick Redfern has been laid off from his job at the *Washington Post*.

The toll is daunting. As former *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie Jr. and *Post* associate editor Robert Kaiser have observed, "A great news organization is difficult to build and tragically easy to disassemble." That disassembling is now in full swing. As journalists are laid off and newspapers cut back or shut down, whole sectors of our civic life go dark. Newspapers that long ago closed their foreign bureaus and eliminated their crack investigative operations are shuttering at warp speed what remains of city hall, statehouse and Washington bureaus. The Cox chain, publisher of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Austin American-Statesman* and fifteen other papers, will padlock its DC bureau on April 1—a move that follows the closures of the respected Washington bureaus of Advance Publications (the Newark *Star-Ledger*, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and others); Copley Newspapers and its flagship *San Diego Union-Tribune*; as well as those of the once great regional dailies of Des Moines, Hartford, Houston, Pittsburgh, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Toledo.

Mired in debt and facing massive losses, the managers of corporate newspaper firms seek to right the sinking ship by cutting costs, leading remaining newspaper readers to ask why they are bothering to pay for publications that are pale shadows of themselves. It is the daily newspaper death dance–cum–funeral march.

But it is not just newspapers that are in crisis; it is the institution of journalism itself. By any measure, journalism is missing from most commercial radio. TV news operations have become celebrity- and weather-obsessed "profit centers" rather than the journalistic icons of the Murrow and Cronkite eras. Cable channels "fill the gap" with numberless pundits and "business reporters," who got everything about the last decade wrong but now complain that the government doesn't know how to set things right. Cable news is defensible only because of the occasional newspaper reporter moonlighting as a talking head. But what happens when the last reporter stops collecting a newspaper paycheck and goes into PR or lobbying? She'll leave cable an empty vessel and take the public's right to know anything more than a rhetorical flourish with her.

The Internet and blogosphere, too, depend in large part on "old media" to do original journalism. Web links still refer readers mostly to stories that first appeared in print. Even in more optimistic scenarios, no one has a business model to sustain digital journalism beyond a small number of self-supporting services. The attempts of newspapers to shift their operations online have been commercial failures, as they trade old media dollars for new media pennies. We are enthusiastic about Wikipedia and the potential for collaborative efforts on the web; they can help democratize our media and politics. But they do not replace skilled journalists on the ground covering the events of the day and doing investigative reporting. Indeed, the Internet cannot achieve its revolutionary potential as a citizens' forum without such journalism.

So this is where we stand: much of local and state government, whole federal departments and agencies, American activities around the world, the world itself—vast areas of great public concern—are either neglected or on the verge of neglect. Politicians and administrators will work increasingly without independent scrutiny and without public accountability. We are entering historically uncharted territory in America, a country that from its founding has valued the press not merely as a watchdog but as the essential nurturer of an informed citizenry. The collapse of journalism and the democratic infrastructure it sustains is not a development that anyone, except perhaps corrupt politicians and the interests they serve, looks forward to. Such a crisis demands solutions equal to the task. So what are they?

What happens when the last reporter stops collecting a newspaper paycheck and goes into PR or lobbying?

Regrettably the loud discussion of the collapse of journalism has been far stronger in describing the symptoms than in providing remedies. With the frank acknowledgment that the old commercial system has failed and will not return, there has been a flurry of modest proposals to address the immodest crisis. These range from schemes to further consolidate news gathering at the local level to pleas for donations from news consumers and hopes that hard-pressed philanthropists and foundations will decide to go into the news business. And they range from ineffectual to improbable to undesirable. Walter Isaacson has proposed that newspapers come up with a plan to charge readers "micropayments" for online content. Even if such a system were practically possible, the last thing we should do is erect electronic walls that block the openness and democratic genius of the Internet.

Don't get us wrong. We are enthusiastic about many of the efforts to promote original journalism online, such as ProPublica, Talking Points Memo and the Huffington Post. We cheer on exciting local endeavors, such as MinnPost in

John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney were the founders, with Josh Silver, of Free Press, which has launched a campaign to save the news. Their book, Saving Journalism: The Soul of Democracy, *will be published by New Press in the fall.*

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the Twin Cities—a nonprofit, five-day-a-week online journal that covers Minnesota politics with support from major foundations, wealthy families and roughly 900 member-donors contributing $10 to $10,000. But even our friends at MinnPost acknowledge that their project is not filling the void in a metro area that still has two large, if struggling, daily newspapers. Just about every serious journalist involved in an online project will readily concede that even if these ventures pan out, we will still have a dreadfully undernourished journalism system with considerably less news gathering and reporting, especially at the local level.

For all their merits and flaws, these fixes are mere triage strategies. They are not cures; in fact, if there is a risk in them, it is that they might briefly discourage the needed reshaping of ownership models that are destined to fail.

The place to begin crafting solutions is with the understanding that the economic downturn did not cause the crisis in journalism; nor did the Internet. The economic collapse and Internet have greatly accentuated and accelerated a process that can be traced back to the 1970s, when corporate ownership and consolidation of newspapers took off. It was then that managers began to balance their books and to satisfy the demand from investors for ever-increasing returns by cutting journalists and shutting news bureaus. Go back and read a daily newspaper published in a medium-size American city in the 1960s, and you will be awed by the rich mix of international, national and local news coverage and by the frequency with which "outsiders"—civil rights campaigners, antiwar activists and consumer advocates like Ralph Nader—ended up on the front page.

The old corporate media system choked on its own excess. We should not seek to restore or re-create it. We have to move forward.

As long ago as the late 1980s and early 1990s, prominent journalists and editors like Jim Squires were quitting the field in disgust at the contempt corporate management displayed toward journalism. Print advertising, which still accounts for the lion's share of newspaper revenue, declined gently as a percentage of all ad spending from 1950 to '90, as television grew in importance. Starting in 1990, well before the rise of the web as a competitor for ad dollars, newspaper ad revenues went into a sharp decline, from 26 percent of all media advertising that year to what will likely be around 10 percent this year.

Even before that decline, newspaper owners were choosing short-term profits over long-term viability. As far back as 1983, legendary reporter Ben Bagdikian warned publishers that if they continued to water down their journalism and replace it with (less expensive) fluff, they would undermine their raison d'être and fail to cultivate younger readers. But corporate newspaper owners abandoned any responsibility to maintain the franchise. When the Internet came along, newspapers were already heading due south.

We do not mean to suggest that '60s journalism was perfect or that we should aim to return there. Even then journalism suffered from a generally agreed-upon professional code that relied far too heavily on official sources to set the news agenda and decide the range of debate in our political culture. That weakness of journalism has been magnified in the era of corporate control, leaving us with a situation most commentators are loath to acknowledge: the quality of journalism in the United States today is dreadful.

Of course, there are still tremendous journalists doing outstanding work, but they battle a system increasingly pushing in the opposite direction. (That is why some of the most powerful statements about our current circumstances come in the form of books, like Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine;* or documentaries, like Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*; or beat reporting in magazines, like that of Jane Mayer and Seymour Hersh at *The New Yorker*.) The news media blew the coverage of the Iraq invasion, spoon-feeding us lies masquerading as fact-checked verities. They missed the past decade of corporate scandals. They cheered on the housing bubble and genuflected before the financial sector (and Gilded Age levels of wealth and inequality) as it blasted debt and speculation far beyond what the real economy could sustain. Today they do almost no investigation into where the trillions of public dollars being spent by the Federal Reserve and Treasury are going but spare not a moment to update us on the "Octomom." They trade in trivia and reduce everything to spin, even matters of life and death.

No wonder young people find mainstream journalism uninviting; it would almost be more frightening if they embraced what passes for news today. Older Americans have been giving up on old media too, if not as rapidly and thoroughly as the young. If we are going to address the crisis in journalism, we have to come up with solutions that provide us with hard-hitting reporting that monitors people in power, that engages all our people, not just the classes attractive to advertisers, and that seeks to draw all Americans into public life. Going backward is not an option; nor is it desirable. The old corporate media system choked on its own excess. We should not seek to restore or re-create it. We have to move forward to a system that creates a journalism far superior to that of the recent past.

We can do exactly that—but only if we recognize and embrace the necessity of government intervention. Only government can implement policies and subsidies to provide an institutional framework for quality journalism. We understand that this is a controversial position. When French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently engineered a $765 million bailout of French newspapers, free marketeers rushed to the barricades to declare, "No, no, not in the land of the free press." Conventional wisdom says that the founders intended the press to be entirely independent of the state, to preserve the integrity of the press. Bree Nordenson notes that when she informed famed journalist Tom Rosenstiel that her visionary 2007 *Columbia Journalism*

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Review article concerned the ways government could support the press, Rosenstiel "responded brusquely, 'Well, I'm not a big fan of government support.' I explained that I just wanted to put the possibility on the table. 'Well, I'd take it off the table,' he said."

We are sympathetic to that position. As writers, we have been routinely critical of government—Democratic and Republican—over the past three decades and antagonistic to those in power. Policies that would allow politicians to exercise even the slightest control over the news are, in our view, not only frightening but unacceptable. Fortunately, the rude calculus that says government intervention equals government control is inaccurate and does not reflect our past or present, or what enlightened policies and subsidies could entail.

Our founders never thought that freedom of the press would belong only to those who could afford a press. They would have been horrified at the notion that journalism should be regarded as the private preserve of the Rupert Murdochs and John Malones. The founders would not have entertained, let alone accepted, the current equation that seems to say that if rich people determine there is no good money to be made in the news, then society cannot have news. Let's find a king and call it a day.

The founders regarded the establishment of a press system, the Fourth Estate, as the first duty of the state. Jefferson and Madison devoted considerable energy to explaining the necessity of the press to a vibrant democracy. The government implemented extraordinary postal subsidies for the distribution of newspapers. It also instituted massive newspaper subsidies through printing contracts and the paid publication of government notices, all with the intent of expanding the number and variety of newspapers. When Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s he was struck by the quantity and quality of newspapers and periodicals compared with France, Canada and Britain. It was not an accident. It had little to do with "free markets." It was the result of public policy.

Moreover, when the Supreme Court has taken up matters of freedom of the press, its majority opinions have argued strongly for the necessity of the press as the essential underpinning of our constitutional republic. First Amendment absolutist Hugo Black wrote that the "Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society." Black argued for the right and necessity of the government to counteract private monopolistic control over the media. More recently Justice Anthony Kennedy, a Reagan appointee, argued that "assuring the public has access to a multiplicity of information sources is a governmental purpose of the highest order."

But government support for the press is not merely a matter of history or legal interpretation. Complaints about a government role in fostering journalism invariably overlook the fact that our contemporary media system is anything but an independent "free market" institution. The government subsidies established by the founders did not end in the eighteenth—or even the nineteenth—century. Today the government doles out tens of billions of dollars in direct and indirect subsidies, including free and essentially permanent monopoly broadcast licenses, monopoly cable and satellite privileges, copyright protection and postal subsidies. (Indeed, this magazine has been working for the past few years with journals of the left and right to assure that those subsidies are available to all publications.) Because the subsidies mostly benefit the wealthy and powerful, they are rarely mentioned in the fictional account of an independent and feisty Fourth Estate. Both the rise and decline of commercial journalism can be attributed in part to government policies, which scrapped the regulations and ownership rules that had encouraged local broadcast journalism and allowed for lax regulation as well as tax deductions for advertising—policies that greatly increased news media revenues.

Today the government already doles out billions in direct and indirect subsidies, including monopoly licenses and postal subsidies.

The truth is that government policies and subsidies already define our press system. The only question is whether they will be enlightened and democratic, as in the early Republic, or corrupt and corrosive to democracy, as has been the case in recent decades. The answer will be determined in coming years as part of what is certain to be a bruising battle: media companies and their lobbying groups will argue against the "heavy hand of government" while defending existing subsidies. They will propose more deregulation, hoping to capitalize on the crisis to remove the last barriers to print, broadcast and digital consolidation in local markets—creating media "company towns," where competition is eliminated, along with journalism jobs, in pursuit of better returns for investors. Enlightened elected officials, media unions and public interest and community groups that recognize the role of robust journalism are going to have to step up to argue for a real fix.

Fortunately, an increasing number of veteran journalists, scholars and activists are beginning to grasp the historical significance of the present moment and the central role of public policy. It was the late James Carey, decorated University of Illinois and Columbia journalism professor and no fan of government power, who saw this before almost anyone else, writing in 2002: "Alas, the press may have to rely upon a democratic state to create the conditions necessary for a democratic press to flourish and for journalists to be restored to their proper role as orchestrators of the conversation of a democratic culture."

We have to ask where we want to end up, after the reforms have been implemented. In our view we need to have competing independent newsrooms of well-paid journalists in every state and in every major community. This is not about newspapers or even broadcast media; it entails all media and accepts

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that we may be headed into an era when nearly all of our communication will be digital. Ideally this will be a pluralistic system, where there will be different institutional structures. Varieties of nonprofit media will have to play a much larger role, though not a monopolistic one.

We recognize and embrace the need for a system in which there will be a range of perspectives from left to right, alongside some media more intent on maintaining a less explicitly ideological stance. We must have a system that prohibits state censorship and that minimizes commercial control over journalistic values and pursuits. The right of any person to start his or her own medium, commercial or nonprofit, at any time is inviolable. From this foundation we can envision a thriving, digital citizen's journalism complementing and probably merging with professional journalism. What will the mix be? It would vary, with more not-for-profit and subsidized media in rural and low-income areas, more for-profit media in wealthier ones. The first order of any government intervention would be to assure that no state or region would be without quality local, state, national or international journalism.

We begin with the notion that journalism is a public good, that it has broad social benefits far beyond that between buyer and seller. Like all public goods, we need the resources to get it produced. This is the role of the state and public policy. It will require a subsidy and should be regarded as similar to the education system or the military in that regard. Only a nihilist would consider it sufficient to rely on profit-seeking commercial interests or philanthropy to educate our youth or defend the nation from attack. With the collapse of the commercial news system, the same logic applies. Just as there came a moment when policy-makers recognized the necessity of investing tax dollars to create a public education system to teach our children, so a moment has arrived at which we must recognize the need to invest tax dollars to create and maintain news gathering, reporting and writing with the purpose of informing all our citizens.

So, if we can accept the need for government intervention to save American journalism, what form should it take? In the near term, we need to think about an immediate journalism economic stimulus, to be revisited after three years, and we need to think big. Let's eliminate postal rates for periodicals that garner less than 20 percent of their revenues from advertising. This keeps alive all sorts of magazines and journals of opinion that are being devastated by distribution costs. It is these publications that often do investigative, cutting-edge, politically provocative journalism.

What to do about newspapers? Let's give all Americans an annual tax credit for the first $200 they spend on daily newspapers. The newspapers would have to publish at least five times per week and maintain a substantial "news hole," say at least twenty-four broad pages each day, with less than 50 percent advertising. In effect, this means the government will pay for every citizen who so desires to get a free daily newspaper subscription, but the taxpayer gets to pick the newspaper—this is an indirect subsidy, because the government does not control who gets the money. This will buy time for our old media newsrooms—and for us citizens—to develop a plan to establish journalism in the digital era. We could see this evolving into a system to provide tax credits for online subscriptions as well.

None of these proposed subsidies favor or censor any particular viewpoint. The primary condition on media recipients of this stimulus subsidy would be a mild one: that they make at least 90 percent of their content immediately available free online. In this way, the subsidies would benefit citizens and taxpayers, expanding the public domain and providing the Internet with a rich vein of material available to all.

What should be done about the disconnect between young people and journalism? Have the government allocate funds so every middle school, high school and college has a well-funded student newspaper and a low-power FM radio station, all of them with substantial websites. We need to get young people accustomed to producing journalism and to appreciating what differentiates good journalism from the other stuff.

The essential component for the immediate stimulus should be an exponential expansion of funding for public and community broadcasting, with the requirement that most of the funds be used for journalism, especially at the local level, and that all programming be available for free online. Other democracies outspend the United States by whopping margins per capita on public media: Canada sixteen times more; Germany twenty times more; Japan forty-three times more; Britain sixty times more; Finland and Denmark seventy-five times more. These investments have produced dramatically more detailed and incisive international reporting, as well as programming to serve young people, women, linguistic and ethnic minorities and regions that might otherwise be neglected by for-profit media.

Perhaps in the past the paucity of public media in the United States could be justified by the enormous corporate media presence. But as the corporate sector shrivels we need something to replace it, and fast. Public and community broadcasters are in a position to be just that, and to keep alive the practice of news gathering in countless communities across the nation. Indeed, if a regional daily like the *San Francisco Chronicle* fails this year, why not try a federally funded experiment: maintain the newsroom as a digital extension of the local public broadcasting system?

Currently the government spends less than $450 million annually on public media. (To put matters in perspective, it spends several times that much on Pentagon public relations designed, among other things, to encourage favorable press coverage of the wars that the vast majority of Americans oppose.) Based on what other highly democratic and free countries do, the allocation from the government should be closer to $10 billion. All totaled, the suggestions we make here for subscription subsidies, postal reforms, youth media and investment in public broadcasting have a price tag in the range of $60 billion over the next three years.

This is a substantial amount of money. In normal times it might be too much to ask. But in a time of national crisis, when an informed and engaged citizenry is America's best

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Edward Koren

Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.
In an interesting experiment, the city of Philadelphia, suffering a graffiti plague in 1984, hired muralist Jane Golden to find the graffiti makers and harness their natural creativity. Her effort evolved into the Mural Arts Program employing about 300 artists a year to complete more than 2,700 murals, making Philly Mural City. Thomas Eakins House, 1729 Mount Vernon Street, Philadelphia, PA 19130

A Short History of Art Censorship in Our Time.
Includes the Subway Kiss-Off, NEA Defunds Smut, Boobs on the Tube, Don't Monkey with W, Who Flung the Dung?. See p. 32-33.

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hope, $20 billion a year is chicken feed for building what would essentially be a bridge across which journalism might pass from dying old media to the promise of something new. Think of it as a free press "infrastructure project" that is necessary to maintain an informed citizenry, and democracy itself. It would keep the press system alive. And it has the added benefit of providing an economic stimulus. If these journalists (and the tens of thousands of production and distribution workers associated with newspapers) are not put to work through the programs we propose, their knowledge and expertise will be lost. They will be unemployed, and their unemployment will contribute to further stagnation and economic decline—especially in big cities where newspapers are major employers.

These proposals are a good start, but then the really hard work begins. We have to come up with a plan to convert failing newspapers into journalistic entities with the express purpose of assuring that fully staffed, functioning and, ideally, competing newsrooms continue to operate in communities across the country. The only way to do this is by using tax policies, credit policies and explicit subsidies to convert the remains of old media into independent, stable institutions that are ready to compete and communicate in the decades to come. To get from here to there, and especially to make possible multiple competing newsrooms in larger communities, policy-makers should be open to commercial ownership, municipal ownership, staff ownership or independent nonprofit ownership. Ideally the next media system will have a combination of the above; and the government should be prepared to rewrite rules and regulations and to use its largesse to aid a variety of sound initiatives.

We confess that we do not have all the answers. Neither, we have discovered, does anyone else. The fatal flaw in so many sincere but doomed responses to the current crisis is that they try to do the impossible, to create a system using varying doses of foundation grants, do-gooder capitalism, citizen donations, volunteer labor, the anticipation of a miraculous increase in advertising manna and/or a sudden—and in our view unimaginable—reversal on the part of Americans who have thus far shown no inclination to pay for online content. At best, these are piecemeal proposals when we are in dire need of building an entire edifice. The money from these sources is insufficient to address the crisis in journalism.

We have to open the door to enlightened public policies and subsidies. We need our members of Congress and our leading scholars to approach this matter with the same urgency with which they would approach the threat of terrorism, pandemic, financial collapse or climate change. We need an organized citizenry demanding the institutions that make self-government possible. Only then can we, like our founders, build a free press. The technologies and the economic challenges are, of course, more complex than in the 1790s, but the answer is the same: the democratic state, the government, must create the conditions for sustaining the journalism that can provide the people with the information they need to be their own governors. ■

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Miseries of *Il Manifesto*

Italy's small, independent, radical daily is an indispensable voice on the left.

by NORMAN BIRNBAUM

American newspapers and monthlies and weeklies are in serious financial difficulty, so why pay attention to the survival struggles of an Italian daily, *Il Manifesto*, which has an average circulation of 30,000 and an eccentric devotion to ideas of major social transformation? It calls itself Communist in a world in which revolution counts as another twentieth-century illusion.

The paper's name derives from a 1969 declaration by a group of Communists calling on their party to awake from its bureaucratic slumbers. The party was by then a pillar of the existing order, partners with the reigning Christian Democrats in running the country. It governed major cities and regions, had great influence in the trade unions and was a major presence in the culture. The Communists' popular and reflective leader, Enrico Berlinguer, defended settling for a limited share of power as an interim solution preferable to total opposition.

To his impatient younger critics and vexed older ones, the party's grand bargain ignored the aspirations of the citizenry and blocked the possibilities of transformation. The Manifesto group sought a renewal of party doctrine and practice, a great leap forward in popular participation. The group's campaign was a critical element in the massive eruption of social protests in Italy in 1969, which took the Communist leadership by surprise. The dissidents left the party. The ensuing shock induced Berlinguer to rejuvenate and redefine the party—in some part in the Manifesto group's direction.

In April 1971 the group founded a daily, *Il Manifesto*; its first principle was independence of any party line. The equivalent in the United States would be a daily edition of *The Nation* (or the old New York left daily, *PM*, which lasted from 1940–48). *Il Manifesto* became a school for independent younger journalists and a home to irreconcilably critical older ones. Its main competitor was initially *l'Unità*, the official daily of the Communist Party until the party dissolved in 1991. *L'Unità* is still published, and it is associated with the Communist successor, the Democratic Party. Its circulation has diminished from 240,000 to 40,000. *Il Manifesto* also confronts the much less widely read *Liberazione*, published by the small, stubbornly leftist Communist Refoundation Party, founded in 1991 and no longer in Parliament. Indeed, none of the smaller political groups close to the *Manifesto* heritage are any longer in Parliament. Many who vote for the Democrats still think of *Il Manifesto* as the voice of their sometimes suppressed political conscience.

Il Manifesto's independence of party affiliation has enabled it to draw upon a broad spectrum of Italy's radical democratic traditions. It has expressed the concerns of many social movements: associations to aid immigrants and the impoverished, neighborhood groups, seniors, students and teachers, the unemployed, women. It has exposed corruption no matter what the affiliations of the guilty.

RYAN INZANA

And it has made news itself. In 2000 a neofascist loner blew up a bomb (and nearly himself) at its offices. In 2005 the car in which the paper's Iraq correspondent, Giuliana Sgrena, was speeding to the Baghdad airport was fired on by US soldiers, wounding her, killing her bodyguard and provoking an international incident.

Above all, *Il Manifesto* has assumed the traditional radical pedagogic task of depicting events inside and outside Italy as parts of a larger whole. Much of the rest of the media, even when not sunk in bottomless vulgarity, present the world as a jumble of unconnected happenings.

When the parties of the left and democratic center constituted national governments in past decades (most recently until 2008), their conflicts and hesitations prevented them from instituting convincing and durable reforms. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his allies exploited the disappointment of the citizens with a cynical antipolitics, while they looted the economy and the state, encouraged xenophobia and practiced authoritarianism. Berlusconi's vast media holdings are united with the subjugated state television chains in a perpetual Roman carnival of lying stupidity. (Imagine Murdoch as president, Limbaugh and Coulter inescapable on television, and the *Washington Post*, for all its many present flaws, reduced to the level of the

Norman Birnbaum, a member of the Nation *editorial board, is a longtime contributor on European affairs.*

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New York Post.) Italy's quality papers (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*) are struggling, not always with complete success, to maintain quality—while their educated readers are often restive.

Now the small critical space occupied by *Il Manifesto* is threatened with erasure. Late last year, Berlusconi introduced legislation eliminating state subsidies for nonprofit associations. *Il Manifesto* is legally an editorial cooperative, not a commercial enterprise, and was eligible for state funding. But under the new law, journalistic funding is limited to media directly owned by a party. That is a status *Il Manifesto*'s editors and writers do not want. They understand themselves as connected to a social movement with deep roots in the past, and they regard the tactical discipline of a party as a hindrance or worse. In any case, Italy's parties of the left are foundering. The Democrats have just lost an important regional election in Sardinia and replaced their leader. *Il Manifesto*'s independence is an element of continuity Italy's democratic left can ill afford to lose.

Should the newspaper have to cease publication, the European and Italian left would be without one of its most authentic voices. Friends influential in the Catholic Church and the senior ranks of the Democratic Party have said that they find *Il Manifesto* indispensable to their work. Many in the cultural and political elite agree.

I did ask the editors of *Il Manifesto* why, in a nation with a great socialist tradition, they could not increase their newspaper's circulation. They replied that the tradition is in disrepair; older adherents and younger potential recruits are discouraged. Moreover, they said, potential readers are distracted by the newer Internet media, which appropriate *Il Manifesto*'s critical journalism, bit by bit, but which ignore its larger project of political education. The crisis of *Il Manifesto* offers a lesson not limited to Europe.

A newspaper that deals with the vertiginous fluctuations of daily politics by asking what these mean in a larger historical context does place demands on its readers. We are left to question the viability of the old-fashioned ideas of an educated citizenry.

Berlusconi has targeted, with his plebeian antagonism to the intelligence required of a functioning democracy, one of the remaining institutions of Italian republicanism. *Il Manifesto*'s Italian and European supporters are rallying to its assistance. Letters (and checks) in support can be sent to the editors at: *Il Manifesto*, Via A. Bargoni 8, 00153 Rome, Italy. If you go to ilmanifesto.it, you can click on "donate on line" (look for the American flag). ■

The People's Press Conference

A new initiative empowers citizens to submit and rank questions for the president to answer.

by ARI MELBER

On his first day in office, President Obama pledged to make his administration "the most open and transparent in history." Americans can already see more of their government—from splashy slide shows of Oval Office meetings to newly declassified memos about the executive's wartime powers. Unlike Obama's dynamically interactive campaign, however, WhiteHouse.gov does not foster much meaningful dialogue with citizens. At least not yet.

Obama can go much further to deliver on his promise. He took a small step in February by fielding a question from a Huffington Post reporter at his first press conference. Yet advancing a connected, engaged citizenry requires more than acknowledging the rise of online media. Here is one tradition that Obama could start: invite new and independent voices into the East Room by pledging to take a citizen-generated question at every prime-time press conference.

To put this idea into action—and give the busy White House something tangible to work with—*The Nation* is teaming up with a broad coalition of new and traditional media, including the *Washington Times* and the Personal Democracy Forum, to begin gathering questions from you, the public.

"Ask the President" uses CommunityCounts.com, an interactive portal that provided public voting on questions for politicians during the presidential primaries. It was built by David Colarusso, a 30-year-old law student and former high school teacher. (You can participate by visiting TheNation.com or communitycounts.com/obama.)

The coalition is inviting people to write in questions or submit them as videos. Participants can see all the questions on the site and vote on the ones the president should answer. The system allows only one vote per question from each Internet IP address, but there is no limit on how many questions people can support. The portal also enables anyone to embed questions on other websites. So after posting a question about bank nationalization, for example, a participant can then link to that question on another site—a blog or news site—and appeal to others to back it.

After public voting, the coalition will select and send a credentialed journalist to attend the next presidential press conference, ready to choose from the list of the most popular citizen questions. (This journalist would focus only on these questions from citizens and would not reduce the time available for the standing pool of White House reporters.) The precise question will not be announced in advance, though the choices will obviously be public. At the press conference, the journalist can choose from the top questions, prioritizing a topic that is substantive, factual and that has not already been addressed by the president.

Ari Melber (arimelber.com) is The Nation*'s Net Movement correspondent.*

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This assumes, of course, that President Obama agrees to participate.

The East Room press conferences are among the most exclusive and least democratic public gatherings in American politics; the White House controls who attends and who gets called on. So the coalition is appealing directly to the Obama administration to admit and call on the journalist armed with citizen questions. Obama has repeatedly pledged a more innovative, interactive government. Wide public engagement in "Ask the President"—and strong political support for Obama's participation—can make that pledge a reality.

Obama's team is likely to welcome this idea. After all, some of the best precedents for it come from the 2008 campaign and Obama's innovative transition website, Change.gov. Of the thousands of queries lobbed at the candidates during the presidential campaign, one of the most influential questions was whether candidates would meet with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Cuba and North Korea without conditions. Few observers appreciate, however, that this diplomatic challenge came from a regular citizen, Stephen Sorta of Diamond Bar, California, during the 2007 CNN/YouTube debate. Tapping that kind of citizen input is valuable, explained a CNN executive who oversaw the debate, because people can pose "straightforward, interesting questions that the mainstream media couldn't—or wouldn't—think to ask." During the primary Obama also responded to a citizen question about broadband policy, which had received the most votes at TenQuestions.com, a national, nonpartisan project backed by the *New York Times* editorial board and the Personal Democracy Forum.

Then, after the November election, Obama's transition team invited citizens to submit and vote on questions at Change.gov, pledging that the top queries would be answered by his staff. The response was huge. About 120,000 people wrote more than 86,000 original questions, and millions of votes were cast. That kind of constructive, active participation is great for civic interaction with government, and it ended up advancing accountability, too. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, to his credit, answered several of the citizen questions on Change.gov, but he also ignored the one that drew the most support, about investigating torture and surveillance abuse. Within days, however, ABC's George Stephanopoulos pressed Obama to address the unanswered question in an interview, citing its strong public support. The question platform empowered citizens to put a topic on the national agenda by demonstrating how many people wanted an answer. And the administration's public dodging actually sent the issue *trickling up*, since Stephanopoulos used his access to amplify other people's voices.

Some observers may protest that the media already fixate on what "ordinary Americans" think. True, but usually in a very different way. Take NBC chief White House correspondent Chuck Todd, who recently told C-SPAN that his goal during presidential press conferences is to ask the questions on the minds of everyday Americans. A worthy objective, but what is his method? Reporters often present snapshots of national priorities by citing survey data or gathering anecdotal responses to questions on current events. Few traditional mechanisms, however, capture the public's active interests—empowering people to draft their own ideas, concerns and questions from scratch. Generating and debating new questions is fundamentally different from picking among a scripted menu (as the previous question experiments demonstrated). And virtually no traditional media mechanisms couple that original, individual production with transparent, national voting. Doing both can broaden the issues under public discussion while weighting their priority according to public input—a useful service for our body politic.

The initiative would not only affect White House press conferences; it could also identify trends and guide journalists on an ongoing basis.

With widespread participation, this citizen-driven portal would not only affect Obama's press conferences; it could also grow into a dynamic, data-driven information resource, demonstrating trends, input and ideas to guide journalists on an ongoing basis.

Some Washington reporters have begun informally soliciting a wider range of questions for their work. Stephanopoulos asked viewers for questions before his January interview with Obama. Meanwhile, David Gregory, host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, and Jake Tapper, ABC's senior White House correspondent, are experimenting with the micromessage site Twitter to gather input for their interviews with government officials. On March 3 Tapper tapped a bulletin to his Twitter network, in the informal style common on the site, inviting questions for the daily briefings: "didnt get to it today but consider this a standing invite for good q suggestions for gibbs."

These forays are positive, if they reflect a genuine receptivity to deeper citizen input in journalism and government accountability. Yet they offer no reliable metrics for pooling or assessing public priorities. They are not transparent, either,

ASK THE PRESIDENT

What questions do you think President Obama should be called upon to answer at his next press conference? Participants in the "Ask the President" initiative can submit their suggestions (in print or by video), view others' submissions and vote for the ones they think are the most important. Go to TheNation.com or communitycounts.com/obama to get started.

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since there is no unified structure displaying how many people drafted questions, or what other citizens think of them, or whether a reporter's selected questions are representative of those submitted. As a largely one-way circuit, such efforts are less likely to foster public debate or spark sustained citizen participation.

Tightly controlled government portals can be a fairly closed circuit, too. People deserve forums that are free, open and interactive. Now, if Obama decides to answer the leading citizen questions in another forum—say, in a town-hall event or web video from the road—that would be a start. The "Ask the President" model, however, is more independent than controlled interaction on government websites, because officials are not picking the questions or prerecording responses. The top questions would be known to anyone who cares to look, but the process would be independent, and the question would be posed live for the president's response.

It is past time to develop more formal, accountable platforms to channel America's tremendous civic energy. Given today's technology and rapid innovations in participatory media, why shouldn't citizens have some regular route to questioning the president?

President Obama has already led several innovative reforms in this direction. He overhauled freedom-of-information policy, launched Recovery.gov for accountable stimulus tracking and even created a White House director of citizen participation, filling the position with an executive from Google Moderator—the technology behind the question platform at Change.gov. The transition team's call for citizen questions was also intriguing, though the program has not been used since the inauguration. And even when it was running, of course, Change.gov sent questions only to press staff, not to Obama.

When it comes to advancing interactive access to the White House, we may need to take the lead. The traditional press can cooperate with this modest experiment, engaging the ideas, concerns and experiences that the public brings to the questions facing our government. Reporters should not wait to be dragged toward participatory innovation by more creative audiences. The recent record shows how participatory and traditional media can work symbiotically, not only in activating enthusiasm for politics—a civic boon in its own right—but also in broadening and advancing the kind of robust inquiries at the core of traditional journalism. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

phase that started in the 1970s ended in 1998, and because of the phenomenon known as "the quiet sun" it looks as though we are in for a cooling phase for at least the next quarter-century. I hope the poor will be able to stay warm in the Bayshore Mall.

Alexander Cockburn

Double Double Standard in Gaza

Palm Coast, Fla.

Jim Glaser ["Letters," March 9] cites a double standard regarding Gazans "smuggling" weapons while Israel gets megaweapons of "support" from us.

There is another facet to this. During the mid-1940s, when I was in Britain's peacekeeping force in the Holy Land, we were aware that Zionists smuggled in guns and explosives for their terrorist gangs. The Irgunists' and Sternists' leaders, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, became prime ministers of Israel. Far from being condemned as terrorists, they were showered with billions of dollars and tons of ordnance by the United States and used them in their pursuit of Lebensraum and to pulverize Palestinians. Could there be a more hypocritical manifestation of a double standard?

Horace Hone

Paging Alexander the Great—II

New York City

"Paging Alexander the Great" by Gabriella Kolias ["Letters," March 23], against American escalation in Afghanistan, says that "only Alexander the Great succeeded in conquering that country." Actually, Alexander and his armies only superficially conquered Afghanistan, never really controlled it and quickly lost influence there after leaving for more attractive conquests. Afghanistan has always been a loose collection of temporary and shifting alliances, so it cannot have ongoing peace. It is not really a country, except in temporary response to hated invaders.

Gerald M. Levitis

West Palm Beach, Fla.

Afghanistan was Alexander the Great's toughest challenge, and he never subdued its citizens completely. He faced his fiercest battles there and grave loss to his army physically, mentally and financially. In the fourth century BC, he fell afoul of Pashtun tribesmen, took an arrow in the leg and almost lost his life.

Alexander was mired in the region for three long years—more time than he would spend anywhere else on his campaign. His attempts to quell the rebellion would force him to build more fortresses than anywhere else on his route, and to bury more of his troops in its territory. We believe it is accurate to say no one has ever conquered Afghanistan, though much blood has been lost trying.

Terry and George Molina

Thousand-Year-Old Verse

Rochester, N.Y.

Thank you for "Poem" by Bertran de Born [March 9]. It provided many discussions—some readers thought it was contemporary and that the "(circa 1185)" had been added by the writer for effect; some thought it was an actual praising of war; others assumed it was great satire. And thank you for the trip to the past to learn more about the author. The power of the poem reminded me of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Byrna Weir

Correction: Nationalization? Not So Much

In Joseph Stiglitz's "A Bank Bailout That Works" [March 23], it was stated that "even Alan Greenspan and Senator Chris Dodd are supporting bank nationalization." In fact, Senator Dodd has said he does not welcome nationalization, but "we may end up having to do that."

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Books & the Arts.

There Will Always Be Blood

by LORNA SCOTT FOX

Who reads stories of true crime? One imagines a furtive audience of sad saps and sadists, trench-coated lurkers and wan shut-ins. Friends reacted with funny looks when I tried to share my pleasure in *True Crime: An American Anthology*, forcing me to offer a defensive recital of the names on the back cover. Who writes them, then? Bloody deeds are as American as Jesus or money, and often connected to both. Yet it comes as a surprise that so many notable Americans—most, but not all, best known for their fiction—were apprenticed in murder reportage or cultivated a thoughtful sideline in the subject. Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, even José Martí grace the first third of this anthology of fifty pieces. The roster of writers from the twentieth century includes H.L. Mencken, James Thurber and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as Truman Capote and James Ellroy, amid fascinating pros and hacks, forgotten "murder fanciers" and brilliant dabblers.

Thus the charm of the book is that it appeals to both the culture vulture and the plain old vulture in us, while constructing an oblique, perverse history of America. From the day in 1630 when Pilgrim Father John Billington was regretfully hanged for murder so that the new land of Plimoth Plantation could "be purged from blood," blood continued to be spilled in lavish quantities. Observers recorded the spillage from every angle, and the public lapped it up. The collective guilt that cements this ritual is summed up by editor Harold Schechter in his introduction. As Plato, Freud and Durkheim agreed (although one may feel it *still* hasn't sunk in), "violent lawbreakers make it possible for the rest of us to adapt to the demands of normality by acting out, and being punished for, our own unacknowledged impulses." For catharsis to occur, society needs to read all about it. Here is some of the best that was ever read, in one thick hardcover tome you could brain someone with.

Organized crime figures in just a minority of the selections. And rightly so, because it's ordinary individuals we most want to know about, people like us who suddenly crack. As their stories inch forward through some unremarkable day or life toward a climax announced, or sweep back from the glare of the dock or the morgue in search of a truth that may or may not be uncovered, every detail—the great staple of this genre—acquires symbolic weight. The most haunting pieces slow down time under a spotlight, creating a nerve-shredding suspense. As a sequence, enriched by Schechter's presentation of each author and his or her *fait divers*, the selections illuminate the changing frameworks for, and attitudes toward, violent transgression. They reflect developments in police work and the justice system, and in journalism itself. Shifting patterns echo back and forth, but a historical evolution of sorts emerges.

True Crime
An American Anthology.
Edited by Harold Schechter.
Library of America. 788 pp. $40.

In the beginning—according, at least, to *Pillar of Salt* (1699), by Cotton Mather, who hassled people on the way to the gallows for last-minute professions of repentance—irreligion was the root of all evil. Godless men were led to drink and thence to rape and kill. For Mather, any sins against humanity were the outcome of far graver sins against God, such as Sabbath-breaking. It was an infallible moral code. So what would Mather have made of the pious, teetotal Farmer Yates, who in 1781, as he tells his examiners in what reads like an uncensored transcript, is suddenly commanded by an unidentified "Spirit" to slaughter his beloved family for being "idols"? Vividly reliving the inner struggle of human love with mystic duty, in between enthusiastic pursuits of the victims through the snow, this text stands out as the only perpetrator's narrative in the collection; its anonymous presenter cannot in the end decide whether Yates was stricken by

Lorna Scott Fox is a journalist and translator based in London.

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"the effect of insanity" or "a strong delusion of Satan." The old certainties are fraying. Decades earlier, indeed, Franklin had written a wholly secular account for his *Pennsylvania Gazette* of systematic family cruelty: a couple's torture to the death of the man's daughter by a previous marriage. Too enlightened for the demonic explanation but unacquainted with the ways of the unconscious, Franklin was forced to conclude lamely that "this is not the only Instance the present Age has afforded, of the incomprehensible Insensibility Dram-drinking is capable of producing."

Although the Puritan legacy as a blend of repression and transcendence regularly returns (the messages penned by "Son of Sam," for example, contain kitsch echoes of Farmer Yates), secular morality had largely overtaken metaphysics by the early nineteenth century. For the next hundred years or so, money, ambition and status were the great spurs to crime, and that meant comedy. It's already the essence of the Strang-Whipple case (1827), in the arch account from an early anthology that was one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's favorite books, *The Record of Crimes in the United States* (1834). When scheming hussy Elsie Whipple entices lumpen lover Jesse Strang to kill her rich old husband, she embodies a demystified Eve the Temptress myth that was repeated, right down to the farce of failed attempts, in the Snyder-Gray case a hundred years later. In that caper, a Queens housewife named Ruth Brown Snyder lured her lover, one Henry Judd Gray, a corset salesman, into garroting her husband and staging his death as a botched burglary in order to collect the double indemnity on his insurance policy. Sex is consistently entangled with class and wealth: showgirls, playboys and prostitutes take turns as victims and executioners under flickering gaslight, and later in flashbulb-bright vignettes.

Cynicism and sentimentality thrive. The first is exemplified by Mark Twain's brisk contempt in *Roughing It* for the carnival of frontier politics. Desperadoes and saloonkeepers have become the most respected members of society; outlaws run amok, to popular applause and with judicial impunity. In an age of mass communications, King Alfred's rule that a juror be ignorant of a case puts justice in the hands of "ignoramuses." "Why could not the jury law be so altered as to give men of brains and honesty an *equal chance* with fools and miscreants?" Cloying sentiment drips, by contrast, all over Celia Thaxter's ticktock reconstruction of the 1873 Isle of Shoals murder, when two impossibly good, blond Norwegian women—the writer's maid and her sister—were hacked up for a fistful of dollars by a "dark" and shifty German immigrant they had befriended. (Strangely, it's as close as this collection gets to the black male/white female trope, surely a major issue in US crime history, if only in the form of lynchings—but Thaxter's Manichaean ardor makes up for the omission.) The Puritan gallows declaration has become pretty hollow by this stage, in the words ironically chosen by this corniest of writers: "Then he drew about his evil mind the detestable garment of sanctimoniousness, and in sentimental accents he murmured, 'I'm glad Jesus loves me!'" Thaxter, otherwise a fine poet of place, shows how *not* to do it. While almost all contributors indulge in some mixture of lip-licking and hand-wringing, the wisest allow such powerful material to express its own poignancy.

> Under flickering gaslight or in flashbulb-bright vignettes, the murder trial was also theater.

Beneath the froth of sensational trials and just deserts for greedy, stupid people, new themes were forming. If a desire for revenge or a spouse's life insurance seemed understandable, indeed amusing, not so the pointlessness of some savagery, or the psychic chasms it implied. "Boy Fiend" (1871) prefigures the alienated young slashers of the next century. At the same time, the business and career metaphor has become a cliché. Ambrose Bierce, whose experience of the Civil War had thoroughly put him off the human race—he fought at the Battle of Shiloh, where nearly 24,000 Union and Confederate soldiers died during two days of combat—lashed out at both organized and personal crime in Hearst's *Examiner*. His "Criminal Market Review" from the late 1860s is unusual for its admission that crime is not so much a deviation as the very image of the national economy: "Robberies are looking up; Assaults, active; Forgeries, dull." Taking a swipe at the veiled Californian relish in violence—"Our joy at the mutilation of old Hulton has been deeply unspeakable; our lively interest in the shooting and hacking of and by the Dudleys, Ingham and Miller, has been testified in a novel and interesting manner by a private scalp dance at our own apartments"—Bierce links this to the war. "It pleasantly reminds us of the time when we were a soldier." Then, like Twain satirizing the social worship of "blackguards": "Yosemite is a conceded fiction, and the Big Trees a screaming joke.... But we are handy with the pistol and wield a butcher-knife as deftly as an Indian or anybody."

Such a fury of Modernism is unique in this anthology dominated by conventional narrative. Long before becoming the Koizumi Yakumo who wrote with simple elegance about Japan, Lafcadio Hearn was covering murders in Cincinnati. "Gibbeted" (1876) describes an execution in unsparing physiological detail. The reporter even slips among the doctors to feel the pulse of the condemned after the rope breaks on the first attempt. Tear-jerker and black comedy at once, it makes as effective a plea against the death penalty as did Lincoln's cautionary tale, from his lawyer days, about a murder that inexplicably never happened. (The summary of that case also offers a slice of 1840s provincial life, the more evocative for being entirely expository.)

The Gilded Age was the heyday of the murder trial as theater. From Martí's mesmerizing account of the courtroom antics of political assassin Charles Guiteau in 1881, to Damon Runyon's drawled reports of the Snyder-Gray affair in 1927, showbiz rules. Guiteau was in a class of his own: a religious fanatic with the aspect of "a wild pig" and the talents of a stand-up comedian, who switched between cheeky banter and pouting sulks, shows of spiritual anguish and speeches in affected accents, from the genteel to the vulgar. Other defendants rely boringly on tears, like Mrs. Hossack, who—as Susan Glaspell explained in a serial account of Hossack's trial published in the *Des Moines Daily News* in December 1900–April 1901—claimed not to have heard a thing while her husband was bludgeoned next to her in bed. But there's always something to speculate about in the pose and costume of the accused as they perform for their lives, and fun to be had from histrionic attorneys and squirming witnesses. The crowd supplies much of the atmosphere. As Martí puts it, "The onlookers rock with gales of laughter; the prisoner shares in the laughter he provokes; the ushers call for silence; and the judge scolds in vain." Courtroom dramas were magnets for novelists and philosophers as well as gawpers, but especially congenial to theater folk. Spotting in the gallery "ladies and gents with dark circles around their

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eyes," Runyon identifies them as denizens of "the great American stage":

> They were present, as I gathered, to acquire local color for their current, or future contributions to the thespian art, and the hour was a trifle early for them to be abroad in the land. They sat yesterday writing through the proceedings and perhaps inwardly criticizing the stage setting and thinking how unrealistic the trial is as compared to their own productions.

The thrills of adversarial justice as a spectacle—among the few that command the fervor of the whole population—are, of course, archetypal and ongoing. But as the anthology progresses through the twentieth century, the gaiety dries up.

In 1935 the novelist Edna Ferber (*Show Boat*, *Giant*) was scathing about the "Isn't this divine" set that thronged the trial of Bruno Hauptmann, alleged raptor of the Lindbergh baby. Ferber represents a new, feeling awareness of trauma. "Guilty or innocent," she wrote in the *New York Times*, "this man, when he was 17, his bones not yet a man's bones, his mind not yet a man's mind, saw and knew fear, agony, ruthlessness, murder, hunger, cold. He was a German soldier in the war and a product of war." This kind of sensibility aroused the scorn of H.L. Mencken. Invoking the endlessly paroled Baby Face Nelson, he sneered: "Of such sort are the abysmal brutes that the New Penology tells us ought to be handled more tenderly. They are not responsible, it appears, for their wanton and incessant felonies; the blame lies upon society." Though Mencken's gripe was with liberal attitudes to career crime, this divergence inaugurates a recognizable contemporary world: one split between those who seek the causes of wrongdoing in poverty or abuse, and those who would string up sociologists and therapists alongside their clients.

The debate was not made simpler by the growth of a violence that seemed arbitrary, or at least bearing no relation to America's twin mainstays of God and mammon. As Schechter says, "The human community, finding itself under assault from within, searches desperately for a framework or context to explain the apparently unexplainable." But what? Meyer Berger's Pulitzer Prize–winning account of the first "rampage," by a quiet World War II vet who gunned down twelve people on a New Jersey street in 1949, sticks to external facts with a velvet neutrality about unfathomable crises. The gunman gets home, a reporter from the *Camden Evening Courier* calls and there's an unhelpful glimpse into his mind:

> Mr. Buxton asked how many persons Unruh had killed.
>
> The veteran answered. "I don't know. I haven't counted. Looks like a pretty good score."
>
> "Why are you killing people?"
>
> "I don't know," came the frank answer. "I can't answer that yet. I'll have to talk to you later. I'm too busy now."

I don't know. The story ends: "Men and women kept saying: 'We can't understand it. Just don't get it.'" Bewilderment all around is a repeated note from now on, perhaps the most authentic in such cases; "Superman's Crime," a clinical rationalization of the Leopold-Loeb crime published in 1965, seems unarguable and yet inadequate. In the era of postwar prosperity, more young killers begin to display the affectless nihilism we know so well. Take Charles "Smitty" Schmid, an early groover with pancake makeup and an unhealthy hold over the teens of Tucson: boredom, car culture and the glamour of decadence run through Don Moser's dark article for *Life* about the young serial killer. Boredom above all. And a kind of lostness, for the parents had no idea what their kids were up to, while the police "continued to assume that the [dead] girls had joined the ranks of Tucson's runaways"—caught up in the drifting lifestyle that defined the fate of the Black Dahlia years before.

Somewhat surprisingly, the police always get good press. Frantically trying to solve the Dahlia mystery, "during one three-day period, [Sergeant Brown] never got around to changing his shirt." This note of commendation is from Jack Webb's *The Badge: True and Terrifying Crime Stories That Could Not Be Presented on TV, From the Creator and Star of Dragnet* (a book that changed the life of 11-year-old James Ellroy); Schechter's introduction to the piece doesn't mention that Webb and *Dragnet* were tools for cleaning up the LAPD's image. It's true that Thomas Byrnes, a New York City police detective and the author of *Professional Criminals of America* (1886), is credited with inventing the interrogation method of the "third degree," yet in general the honest cops are always trying to get their man, only to see him sprung by Tammany Hall or the New Penologists. If a confession is ever tortured out of anyone, it's the sheriff's doing. In *True Crime*, the principal instance of police misbehavior occurs when impatience with staking out Alice Crimmins, the "Medea of Kew Gardens Hills," leads them to tip off jealous lovers, flatten tires and assist in the destruction of clothing.

A distinct late twentieth-century thread is the inability to cope with change. Nice fundamentalist boy blows himself up because his sweetheart has gone to college; upwardly mobile hillbilly shoots filmmaker he thinks is out to exploit the picturesque misery of the Appalachians. The old America's friction with the new is marvelously suggested in Gay Talese's "Charlie Manson's Home on the Range," published in *Esquire* in 1970 and based on an interview with the old-timer George Spahn, who ran the movie sets and then the ranch where the Manson tribe briefly settled. Talese focuses mostly on Spahn's rootless, resourceful life, emblematic of millions of others. Now he is blind, so that the new arrivals are sensed as voices and smells. He was mystified by spiritual nuggets from Charlie and intrigued by the girls' submissiveness despite their education, so unlike the women he'd known; but as the air turns into "a blend of horse manure and marijuana," even the wranglers start speaking with an irritating softness and "describing him as a 'beautiful person.'" When the crowds and cameras arrive, "lighting up the rickety Hollywood sets, it was like old times"—and when they've gone, the wranglers are still whispering. (For a horrible postscript to hippiedom, see Truman Capote's prison interview with Manson associate Bobby Beausoleil, who brags to Capote about fame, cool and white power.)

This is one of several episodes in *True Crime* that stand out as documentary literature, over and above the sanguinary aspect. Zora Neale Hurston's report for the *Pittsburgh Courier* on the trial of Ruby McCollum, during the late Jim Crow era, is remarkable not just in the absence of any other reflection on racism but for its painful collage of registers and moods. McCollum has shot a white physician. The judge disallows all testimony that might expose the systemic truth of her sexual bondage to the victim, the very relationship being denied by the prosecution as "unthinkable!" And the black community sides with "that nice Dr. Adams," partly because of Ruby's middle-class status; mostly out of a fearful, obsequious caution, unflinchingly ventriloquized.

For some hilarious horror, there's the reconstruction by Edmund Pearson, in the sophisticated spirit of the Roaring Twenties, of an 1870s "wayside tavern" trap in Kansas—an imported Gothic setup (those German immigrants again), complete with curtain behind which one member of the family lurked

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with a sledgehammer, while another beguiled the traveler with what we'd call New Age nonsense. Here is one of two cases in which innocent washerwomen are mistaken, years later, for murderesses who got away.

Great historical writing like Pearson's builds off the core gore to bring place and period to life, and it's unforgettably done in the finest selection of all, by the author and diplomat John Bartlow Martin (President Kennedy's ambassador to the Dominican Republic). Schechter tells us that Martin wrote at one time for mass-circulation magazines, "powerful stories on…muckraking subjects [that] led, in a number of cases, to major public policy changes." Published in 1950, "Butcher's Dozen" explores the ravaged underworlds of Depression-era Cleveland in hallucinatory prose that chronicles the appearance of surgically dismembered bodies whose butcher was never found and, though he operated in a blasted landscape where "people prowl all night," never even glimpsed—but not for want of looking. "The detectives often took two or three hundred hobos off a big freight train; each was a suspect, each a potential victim," and the long, fruitless hunt is as riveting as the characters it flushes out around the blank space left by "that almost unknown creature, a master criminal.…The greatest murderer of all time."

The Butcher lives eternal: no catharsis there. Or as Lincoln ruefully said of his own unsolved mystery, "a writer of novels could bring a story to a more perfect climax." Loose ends are as appropriate in life, of course, as they are annoying in fiction, yet many of these stories do describe a perfect arc from buildup to denouement, and subsequent artists couldn't resist them for what they said about the soul of society and the astounding strangeness of people. It turns out that some of our culture's most iconic products were written by reality before becoming novels or plays, and then, more lastingly, films: *Psycho*, *Rope*, *Double Indemnity*: the originals are all here. Farmer Yates inspired an early novel; Anita Shreve used the Shoals tragedy in a late novel; "Smitty" was the model for Joyce Carol Oates's wonderfully named Arnold Friend; Glaspell followed her report on the Hossack murder with a one-act feminist play, inspired by the case. Theodore Dreiser based *An American Tragedy* on a boy who drowned his pregnant girlfriend in a lake, causing a collective gasp when nine years later the story was replayed, with added sexual delirium, in the case of Robert Allen Edwards, which Dreiser dubbed "the Real American Tragedy." Life, like art, runs periodically short on ideas.

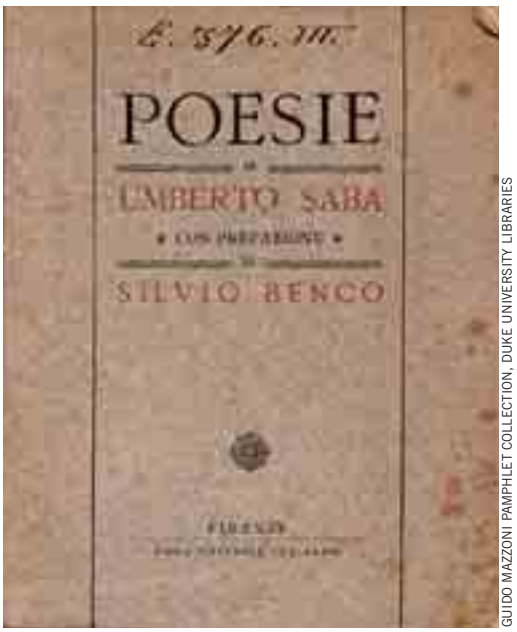
The closing piece, "Nightmare on Elm Drive" (2001), is by Dominick Dunne, developing his *Vanity Fair* work on the Menendez brothers. If the result is diligent but dull, it's surely, in part, because print had already ceased to be the default medium, for crime as well as proper news. Today, more Americans get their information online than from the papers, and 70 percent get it from TV—which garbles instant updates on scandals that once rolled, not quite as hot but a great deal more polished, off the presses. Yet it's clear from this collection that the bedrock for the whole edifice of stylish, literate crime reportage (with that essential dash of low thrills) was the once-captive public of numberless *Couriers*, *Gazettes* and *Enquirers*. Murder will out, but maybe no longer as such a bloody great read. ■

Antica e Moderna

by SUSAN STEWART

Songbook
The Selected Poems of Umberto Saba.
Translated by George Hochfield and Leonard Nathan.
Yale. 562 pp. $35.

"Everything in Trieste is double and triple, beginning with its flora and ending with its ethnicity," proclaimed the Triestine writer Scipio Slataper in an essay from 1911 on "Irredentismo," the desire of the inhabitants of Trieste and other hinterlands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to be united with the Italian mainland, and hence "redeemed." Tucked below the barren limestone promontory called the *Carso* by Italians, the *Karst* by Austrians and the *Krš* by Slovenians, and pummeled by the local northeast wind, the *bora*, Trieste has become most renowned since the early twentieth century for its shape-shifting pseudonymous writers: the poet/memoirist Slataper, killed at 27 fighting for the Italian cause in World War I, who wrote as Pennadoro, an Italian translation of his Slavic surname; the novelist Ettore Schmitz, friend and student of James Joyce, who set out with the pen name E. Samigli before christening himself Italo Svevo; and one of the most important poets of Italian Modernism, Umberto Poli, who used the signatures Umberto Chopin Poli, Umberto da Montereale and Umberto Lopi before settling in his late twenties on Umberto Saba, the name we know him by today.



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Cover of the first edition of *Poesie*, by Umberto Saba, published by Casa Editrice Italiana in 1911

The author of more than fifteen individual books of poetry and a thousand pages of prose, Saba is best known for his *Il Canzoniere* (The Songbook), a continually revised and augmented collection in poems of his life's work. Like Ezra Pound, another Modernist who liked to travel forward while facing backward, Saba chose this simple title to claim his place in the long line of great Mediterranean poets who had used it for their collections, including Guido Cavalcanti, Francesco Petrarca and Giacomo Leopardi. This new volume of selections from Saba's *Songbook*, edited and translated by George Hochfield and the late Leonard Nathan, has been handsomely produced by Yale University Press; not among the least of its attrac-

Susan Stewart's most recent book of poems is Red Rover. *Her translation from the Italian of* Love Lessons: Selected Poems of Alda Merini *(Princeton) is forthcoming in May.*

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tions is how well it fits in the hand. The edition includes, among other work, a generous number of Saba's earliest poems; all fifteen sonnets of his important *Autobiografia* (1924); several of his experimental works of 1928–29, titled *Preludes and Fugues;* and a sampling of his late-life poems, including his beautiful sequence *Uccelli* (Birds) from 1948. Hochfield and Nathan also provide a translation of Saba's early essay, published posthumously, "What Remains for Poets to Do"—an *ars poetica* clarifying his search for a poetry of sincerity and a rejection of rhetoric.

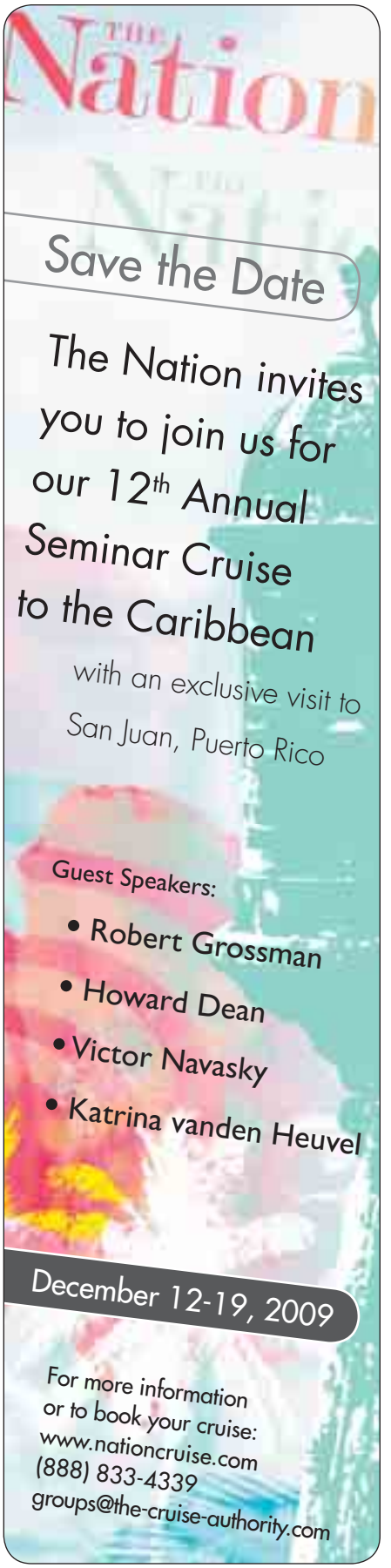
Clearly a labor of love, these collaborative versions, presented with the Italian on facing pages, occupied Hochfield and Nathan for more than a decade. Inevitably they will be compared favorably to Stephen Sartarelli's translations from the *Canzoniere*, which were published in 1998 by Sheep Meadow Press alongside Sartarelli's version of Saba's massive prose account of his poems, *Storia e cronistoria del canzoniere* (History and Chronicle of the Songbook). Sartarelli's pioneering efforts remain admirable, and it is certainly not the case, as the book jacket of the Hochfield and Nathan edition touts, that "until now… English-language readers have had access to only a few examples of this poet's work." The two Sartarelli volumes total nearly 500 pages of translations and in fact are listed in Hochfield and Nathan's bibliography, although Vincent Moleta's expansive 2004 Australian translation of Saba's prose and poetry goes unmentioned. Even so, Saba's final edition of *Il Canzoniere* alone runs to more than 600 pages, with another 330 pages of *Canzoniere apocrifo*; each of these translations, therefore, must be presented as "selected poems," and our understanding of Saba, despite his fame, remains at an early phase.

Umberto Poli was born in Trieste in 1883, when the city was at its zenith as the major port of the Habsburgs. The irredentist sympathies of Umberto's Italian-speaking parents can be detected in their giving him the first name of the Italian emperor. His mother, Felicita Coen, was Jewish and his father, the widower Ugo Edoardo Poli, was not, although he did convert to Judaism at the time of the wedding, taking the middle name Abramo and undergoing circumcision. Within months of the marriage, however, Ugo abandoned his new family, and the baby was sent for his first three years to a young Slovenian wet nurse, Gioseffa Schobar, or Sabar, nicknamed Peppa—the pseudonym Saba is perhaps derived from the surname of this beloved muse. Umberto would meet his father only once, an encounter he describes, with his characteristic emotional ambivalence, in his poetic *Autobiografia*: "My father had been 'the assassin' to me/ until I was twenty, when I met him./I saw right off that he was a child,/and the gift I have I had from him."

Shifted between female relatives in infancy, and an only child, Saba spent most of his school years in Trieste, where he was an indifferent student. Nevertheless he was drawn to the poetry of Leopardi, and in his late teens he began to write poems and learned to play the violin, joining a circle of musicians, painters, writers and socialist journalists around the magazine *The Worker*. A brief period attending the University of Pisa resulted in a nervous breakdown, the first of many attacks of "neurasthenia," and he returned to Trieste to recover. During the ensuing years, Saba often traveled to Florence, mixing in irredentist literary circles there and adopting a Tuscan accent that he used whenever he read aloud from his poetry. In retrospect, his recurring nervous breakdowns seem rooted from the start in the separations of his childhood and the complexities of his identity: a Jewish subject of the Habsburgs by birth, a Roman Catholic Slovene by nurture, an Italian by virtue of his absent father's Venetian origins and a bisexual made anomalous by a heterosexual society. He wrote in an early Leopardian poem to his mother: "…I think/my cradle was cut from a different wood./My spirit always yearned for a sign/ that my gentle friends did not yearn for."

Poli's service with the Italian army in 1907 led him to write a new and intense kind of lyric, his "Military Verses." Often relying on the nocturne form, he developed in these poems a view from below that would later shape his many genre scenes of Trieste in peacetime. He describes his fellow soldiers on maneuvers and at rest, crawling on the ground, snoring, exhausted in their cots. His humane sympathy extends to a view of the earth as animals might see it: "the animals, for whom it's home, and bed,/and bridal chamber, and farm, and table, and everything."

Two years later, he married Carolina ("Lina") Wölfler, and within a year his daughter Linuccia was born. Professing "*Trieste è la città/ la donna è Lina*," Saba addressed his native city and his marriage with equal measures of tenderness and realism. His well-known tribute "To My Wife" compares his bride to a young white hen, a frisky pregnant heifer, a slender dog, a timid rabbit, a faithful swallow and a thrifty ant, finding her in "the females of all/the peaceful animals/that are near to God./…and in no other woman." The marriage was troubled and combative from the beginning, and Saba wrote unflinchingly of his feelings about their many mutual betray-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als; but the tie endured until the two died within months of each other in 1956–57.

Saba's poetry is replete with erotic fantasies—perhaps erotic narratives, it's hard to tell—regarding young boys and girls. His attraction to boys was bound up with the strain of Italian poetry nourished by the work of Giovanni Pascoli, who elaborated a concept of the poet as *fanciullino* (little boy), a figure who maintains his childish sense of naïveté and wonder. Many of Saba's poems describe boys playing sports, running about the streets of Trieste or wandering amid boats on the shore and along the beach. Repeatedly, Saba notes his identification with them: "He has something of me from the distant/past," he writes in "The Boy Enthralled"; "Guido has something of my spirit," he notes in his pastoral poem "Guido." Saba's series *Little Berto* (1929–31), dedicated to his psychoanalyst Edoardo Weiss, returns to the house of Peppa and the theme of infancy as the root of adult conflicts. His guardian angel, he believed, was "a little boy larger than I, but not by much," who wore "light blue knickers" and "carried a white feather." These projections and identifications, however much they involve the Telemachus scenario of a boy searching for a missing father, also indicate the same-sex attraction described in Saba's posthumously published unfinished novel, *Ernesto*. Meanwhile, he would often sign his letters "Ernesto," although within the letters referring to himself as Saba.

Fanciulle (Girls) is the title of a collection published in 1925, and here, too, affection and erotic attraction are often confused, troubled and troubling. His "Paolina," "Chiaretta," "Fiammetta," "Erna," appeal to him because they are not yet women: "I don't believe in woman. I mean/no insult when I say that,/if man has an enemy,/it is always woman…" The misogynistic theories promulgated by the Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character* (1903), which were a vogue of the Middle European (male) intelligentsia at the time, cast their shadow on this work. For better or worse, Weininger, Nietzsche and Freud became, as they were for so many of his peers, the intellectual pillars of Saba's thinking. Without their iconoclastic approaches to emotion and self-knowledge, Saba may never have become the "honest poet" he extolled in 1911 in "What Remains for Poets to Do."

After brief service in the military administration during World War I, and a consequent period of treatment in a military hospital for another episode of neurasthenia, Saba returned to a newly Italian Trieste. He opened a bookshop with a typically ecumenical name—the Libreria Antica e Moderna—on the Via San Nicolò. Saba called the shop "this living memorial to the dead," and he published much of his work under its imprint, including, in 1921, the first-edition *Il Canzoniere*. Before his death, four more editions, continually refashioned, would appear. The Libreria is managed today as a kind of museum of Sabiana by Mario Cerne, the son of Saba's assistant Carlo Cerne, to whom he entrusted the shop during the worst of the persecutions of the Second World War.

Drawing deeply on rhyme, Saba managed to let tradition speak to and through modernity.

Trieste had long been a port of embarkation for Palestine, with European emigration reaching its peak in 1935, yet most of the local Jewish population stayed in the city; and by 1938, as Fascist racial laws came into effect and the British closed down immigration, they were trapped. Then, in September 1943, the Italians signed an armistice with the Allied powers, and the Nazis took over Trieste within a day, setting up an extermination camp in a former rice treatment plant at the edge of the city. Saba and his family fled to Florence. They were hidden in eleven different houses there during the remainder of the war and never reported. Eugenio Montale, also hiding in Florence, visited them, despite the danger, every day.

At war's end, his beloved Trieste a no man's land ruled jointly by Allied forces from 1947 until 1954, when it was again annexed to Italy, Saba lived first in Rome, then in Milan. Although his work began to win some of the most important national poetry prizes and he was given an honorary degree by the University of Rome, his health declined and he became addicted to opium. Between 1954 and 1957 he worked without closure on *Ernesto*. His final years were despairing. Lina died in the late winter of 1956, and he died the following summer.

Any edition of the *Songbook* will compel the reader to turn to Saba's most famous poem, "The Goat," which first appeared in *House and Countryside* (1909–10). Here is the Hochfield and Nathan version:

I talked to a goat.
She was alone in a pasture, and
tethered.
Stuffed with grass, soaked
by the rain, she bleated.

That monotonous bleating was
brother
to my sorrow. And I answered, first
in jest, then because sorrow is
eternal,
has one voice and never changes.
I heard this voice in the wails
of a solitary goat.

In a goat with a Semitic face,
I heard all other pain lamenting,
all other lives.

Much of Saba's poetic destiny is already written into this brief lyric. The first-person voice is not directed toward expression but rather toward the empathy of imaginative listening. For although we cannot know the pain of any other living being, the specificity of the pain of the crying animal is particularly opaque to us. Saba emphasizes this by first letting us know that this solitary goat is not hungry; she seems to suffer from the rain alone, to be the very manifestation of a wail that precedes and follows her and that we human beings, too, might embody. It is not the goat that is "*fraterno al mio dolore*" but the bleating itself. In the Italian, Saba is able to make this shift from the particular to the general via a switch in tense: "*Ho parlato a una capra*" ("I talked to a goat") is in the *passato prossimo*, indicating an action completed in the recent past; "*belava*" ("she bleated") is in the imperfect, indicating a longstanding or frequently repeated action in the past. The incommensurability between what the poet was able to say to the goat and the eternal sorrow of its "*uguale*" bleating is thereby emphasized; similarly in this goat with a "Semitic" face, a face of ancient traditions of lament that were Saba's birthright, he recognizes a mirror image that is as well not a mirror image.

The poem provoked a number of anti-Semitic responses from established critics: the young Slataper, ever self-promoting, criticized Saba as living "in uncertain nostalgic memories"; "*non è classico italiano*," another critic wrote of Saba's deeply classical work. Years later, in his *Storia*, Saba responded to these comments, writing that the "memory of his maternal blood line" informed many of his poems, but that "a goat with a Semitic face" was "predominately visual…it is merely a thumbstroke applied

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to the clay in shaping a figure." The goat's suffering has something to do thereby with its solitude and a too-ready stereotyping of its appearance. The Italian word *ogni* in the last lines—"*ogni altro male, ogni altra vita*"—is deftly able to express this, for the word can indicate at once "every," "each," or "all." Hochfield and Nathan have gone the sweeping route of "all other pain" and "all other lives," but the singular forms of "*male*" and "*vita*" at the end of the poem would lend equal value to "each other pain, each other life."

Placing Saba involves recognizing that the adherents of international modernism in poetry, cutting their ties to the meters, rhymes, narratives and voices of the past, were most often preoccupied with visual form and mechanical motion. Yet for Italian lyric poets, abandoning traditional sung and spoken forms was never an easy matter. Filippo Marinetti had called Trieste, in a 1909 speech, "our beautiful powder-magazine," and the city became the site of the first Futurist "*serata*" at the turn of 1910. Saba, however, just a year later defined himself in exact opposition not only to Futurist rhetoric but also to the longer declamatory poetic tradition of Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele d'Annunzio. Saba insisted he was a "cobbler" who wanted to resole old forms and ground them in "our earthly existence." His poems bear no record of the innovations of twentieth-century technology—no celebrations of airplanes, trains or radios. He saunters through every street of Trieste, catching glimpses of the city's manifold forms of life; his sky holds a little cloud that has haunted him from childhood; his real blackbirds eat real pignoli. Saba bears a loving skepticism toward the world that speaks to his long familiarity with the poems of Heinrich Heine. And it was Heine, his own books destined after more than a century to be burned by the Nazis, who knew that "where they burn books, they will eventually also burn people." In an era of noise and terror, Saba relied on poetry as a refuge of quiet conscience, describing how, during the Fascist years, he hid "more than ever within himself, plugging his ears—even literally—so as not to hear the voices of the loudspeakers."

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Each member of the great triumvirate of Italian Modernist poets, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Montale and Saba, therefore, had to find a way to forge a Modernist poem under these essential features of the language and the great light that Italian lyric cast on all Western poetry. Ungaretti turned to minimalism, refining the language to its essence, honing his work to the mystery inherent in arrangements of crystalline words. Montale usually rhymed without pattern, breaking his lines before or after the expected hendecasyllabic measure and, above all, relying on image and irony. Saba, however, took a different path, drawing so deeply on rhyme and the lyric tradition, adapting them in such surprising ways to present circumstances, that tradition seemed to speak to and through modernity. He wrote, "I loved the worn words that no one else/ dared use. I was enchanted by the rhyme *fiore/amore*," concluding, "I loved the truth that lies in the depths,/almost a forgotten dream, that pain/rediscovers as a friend." Using archaisms and local terms, taking up Dante's Tuscan accent, he addressed the humblest, most overlooked figures of Trieste—the city's servants, children, prostitutes, sailors and factory workers.

Yet the strongest formal influence upon these poems of relentless psychological honesty is Petrarch: his hendecasyllabic line, variations in sonnet and canzone form and use of refrain. A note in the 1913 diary of Saba's friend Aldo Fortuna gives us some sense of Saba's ease with Petrarch's meter. Fortuna records how, waiting for a doctor's visit one day, he proposed a waiter's litany to Saba as a "typical hendecasyllable for an Italian poem": "*Venerdì baccalà, sabato trippa*" (Thursday salt cod, Saturday tripe), and in a flash Saba came back with a rhyming hendecasyllabic response for dessert: "*Mezza granita di caffè con panna*." Coffee "shave ice" (as the Obama family calls it) with whipped cream.

Saba's poetry is autobiographical under conditions where having a life and the means to record it could not be taken for granted. Yet his work was not in consequence absorbed by its historical moment; his protégé Sandro Penna, who died in 1977, was his most direct heir, both in clarity of style and in homoerotic, often pederastic themes. Saba's straightforward language, use of traditional forms and realism also have had an impact on the work of many of the leading Italian poets today, including poems of everyday emotion by Valerio Magrelli, Patrizia Cavalli, Milo De Angelis and Antonella Anedda, and the intricately rhyming patterns of Patrizia Valduga. We can be grateful that Saba failed to fulfill the prediction of his "For a New Fable" (1947–48): "Every year a step forward and the world ten/steps back. In the end I have remained alone." ■

BEN E. WATKINS

Fanny Howe

A Nameless Vocation

by ANGE MLINKO

The Winter Sun
Notes on a Vocation.
By Fanny Howe.
Graywolf. 196 pp. Paper $15.

At the outset of *The Winter Sun*, an apologia for the writing life, Fanny Howe confesses, "Since early adolescence I have wanted to live the life of a poet. What this meant to me was a life outside the law; it would include disobedience and uprootedness. I would be at liberty to observe, drift, read, travel, take notes, converse with friends, and struggle with form." The outlaw poet has a long lineage, from the Beats and Rimbaud back to the troubadours, and it doesn't accommodate the vulnerabilities of womankind. What it would mean for Howe, born in the United States in 1940, to pursue a life of poetry and self-definition—without sacrificing eros and motherhood—unfolds in a series of essays that might take as its motto "lower limit: memoir, upper limit: lyric." *The Winter Sun* is an indispensable companion to Howe's last book of nonfiction prose, *The Wedding Dress* (2003). Both collections circle around the theme of word and life, the *via negativa*, in an increasingly positivistic and cynical world. She subtitles *The Winter Sun* "Notes on a Vocation" but states at the outset that hers is "a vocation that has no name," collapsing the mystical and the literary, Simone Weil and Samuel Beckett.

Fanny Howe has written young adult novels and experimental fiction, but she is best known as a lyric poet of fragmentary serial works that call to mind Hölderlin and Dickinson. She is a reluctant memoirist, circling and digressing around a subject she finds difficult: herself. As a child, she remarks, "I was often mute in the background, sucking my thumb and daydreaming." Howe's background would turn any littérateur green: her father was Mark DeWolfe Howe, a law professor at Harvard descended from the illustrious Quincy family; her mother was Mary Manning, an Irish-born actress, writer and general impresario of the arts in Cambridge. (In her youth Manning worked with Beckett; in 1950 she helped found the Poet's Theater in Cambridge, whose first production included Frank O'Hara's *Try! Try!*.) Life in that household was lively, sociable and privileged, but it comes filtered through Howe's introversion. Her prose is condensed and cadenced to imply silence and shadow. Nameless fears

Ange Mlinko's most recent book is Starred Wire. *She lives in New York's Hudson Valley.*

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persist around the edges; her earliest memories were marked by her father's absence while he served in World War II, then by the revelation of the concentration camps. "While we learned languages, poetry, science, and athletics, the prevailing social attitude was nihilist. Not officially so, not with reference to Nietzsche, but in the stirring cavities of decision making and imagination. Mass murder, global destruction, and genocide were idle topics."

The child sensitive to these intimations of cynicism and apocalypse would grow into a rebellious adult. *The Wedding Dress* opens with a powerful testimony of her youthful marriage and separation from her husband, Carl Senna. They were activists in Boston during the busing crisis (Jonathan Kozol introduced them). After four years of increasingly tense relations, mirrored too perfectly by the tensions outside their door, they were divorced and she, a white single mother, had three interracial children to support in a climate of fear and unrest. "There were many women like me—born into white privilege but with no financial security, given a good education but no training for survival." This crisis, and the example of her much-loved mother-in-law, a black woman from the South, precipitated Howe's conversion to Roman Catholicism.

One can imagine Fanny Howe's journey paralleling that of another radical white woman from the 1960s—Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro, President Barack Obama's mother. Both were intellectual dreamers and nomads, women who fell for men from other worlds, mothers who devoted themselves to their interracial children and instilled a sense of pride (Howe's daughter Danzy Senna is also an acclaimed novelist). But Soetoro was an atheist, a scientist; Howe, a poet, turned to Catholicism. Obama said of his mother, "She raged at poverty and injustice," and Howe repeatedly allies herself with holy fools and those other "weak" people, the poor: "I have always been gullible. Consequently my life is errant and my stories are a defense of mistaken beliefs," she explains in *The Winter Sun*. "I understood women who had many children. They accepted me, they liked to play, they were outcasts who spent their days in parks."

After her marriage ended, Howe moved around, taking itinerant teaching jobs, setting up communal households with other single mothers whenever she could. And after a point, heartbreakingly, she sent her son to live elsewhere—with "generous liberals" who would look after him at a private school. "During these years—between 1978 and 1987—there were 20,315 black males murdered in America; in 1995 alone, there were 7,913 deaths," she writes. She had to separate from her child to ensure his survival; therefore it resonates even more deeply when she reveals, in *The Winter Sun*, that her father's early absence made her "one with the multitudes of children who have started their lives in the shadow of a near or faraway war, one that caused permanent mental disturbance through the hysterical airwaves and removed a parent from their lives for a significant period of time."

Howe's notions of "weakness" are underwritten by the dialectics of Christianity—the meek shall inherit the earth. Or, as she puts it in a discussion about Simone Weil and her relationship to her dominant genius brother: "There is a strange power of resistance that takes hold of certain weak and incompetent people. They refuse to give up, despite a series of blows, errors, and disappointments." In her recollections of growing up in the rarefied atmosphere of Harvard, one particular man, the founder of American studies, F.O. Matthiessen, was not incompetent enough to persist. Of his suicide by defenestration, in 1950, Howe says, "This act was received as a devastating public statement about the ability of one intellectual to survive the postwar years. It was also prophetic. The struggle to foster a culture informed by art and literature was soon to be stifled by the military, scientific, and monetary complex. Some people knew this and found the loss unbearable; most didn't notice."

Howe is well aware of how highly her "invisible-faithful" Catholic values are esteemed by "materialist-skeptical" intellectuals. Bitingly she acknowledges that people like herself "annoy well-adjusted people because weakness is not meant to survive." In pitting herself against the evo-devo celebration of competition that permeates our culture, Howe's unorthodox Catholicism (she quotes liberation theologians) is just as countercultural today as her civil rights activism was in the 1960s.

In their common concern with language and its inadequacy, the poet and the pilgrim converge.

In their common concern with language and its inadequacy, the poet and the pilgrim converge: one is devoted to a vocation with no name; the other to a Being with no name. Howe retraces her life in two long essays, "Branches" and "Person, Place, and Time," in order to understand how it was that she spent long decades at the service of poetry. She replays her fascination with Robert Lowell and Edward Dahlberg, both of whom served as mentors of sorts. (She never actually showed her poems to Lowell, and as for Dahlberg, it "ended bitterly. He chased me around his apartment on Rivington Street with his pants down, having locked the door from the inside, and I had to leap out a window to get away from him.") She recounts stories of people who have moved her—the obscure young adult novelist Antonia White; Emily Brontë; the documentary filmmaker Henry Hampton; Simone Weil; fellow spiritual travelers like Sara Grant and Jacques Lusseyran. Between the more autobiographical and philosophical essays (lower limit: memoir) are short, poetic pieces (upper limit: lyric) like "The Message," "America" and "The Chosen" that serve as reminders that the lyric tradition in English is intimately tied with religious questioning and longing. The experimental poet pushing beyond the limits of the sayable is the direct descendant of a poet like George Herbert, talking to God as the reader eavesdrops; or, of course, Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the great poetic innovators.

Howe is fully comfortable neither with entertaining nor with instructing. Instead, her memoirs and meditations are driven by the revelation that "the future is only the past turned around to look at itself." Like her daydreaming child self, she is bewildered by the demands of time, and finally doesn't really acquiesce to them. She repeats the trope over and over again: "The future is only the past recognizing itself at another location." "We move forward into a past that will be censored." Her digressive, meditative form mirrors this conviction: meditations subvert the demands of linear narrative, modeling a life outside ordinary time. One way in which these meditations are instructive—and as they are "Notes on a Vocation," one imagines the acolytes of creative writing will pick them up in anticipation of, well, advice—is their skepticism toward both this vocation and words themselves. Being a Christian in the twenty-first century defies the logic of the age, but, worse, being a writer means de-

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voting yourself to a vague (and unlucrative) quest: it is impractical, quixotic and perverse. It's this perversity that gives rise, perhaps, to the best "advice" in the book: "Why write if it is not to align yourself with time and space? Better to wash the bottoms of the ill or dying."

Howe does situate herself among her own generation and its history even if she ultimately aligns herself with the transcendental. Followers of her writing have found it published chiefly alongside the Marxian Language poets and the libertine New York Schoolers and other secular Modernists. Indeed, at a glance her poems look comfortable among those others, with surface values approximating disjunction, abstraction and drift. In a statement of sensibility—religious and poetic—in *A Wedding Dress*, Howe advocates "a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability.... It breaks open the lock of dualism (it's this or that) and peers out into space (not this, not that)." This might be a statement from almost anyone in *In the American Tree*, Ron Silliman's landmark anthology of avant-garde poetry published in 1986; but Howe's contrarianism draws from mysticism, not post-structuralism.

Howe admits to being lonely in the English department at the University of California, San Diego, where she was offered her first permanent teaching job in the late 1980s: "It was a time of strange contradictions, when people who loved literature were considered reactionary and people who despised it were in the vanguard." She gently rejects certain experimental processes like appropriation. Any poet wary of the vogue for borrowed language, not to mention computer-generated poems, will relate to her helpless conviction that "perhaps I am only being summoned by my nameless vocation to engender the words I use out of my own body and not to seek them elsewhere." In *A Wedding Dress* she had quoted the theologian Johann Metz on the damage that can be incurred by our obsession with information: "One finally experiences oneself as a kind of newspaper—so many headings, so many items jumbled together with no connection that bears witness to our transcendental part."

This is a conviction that may be grounded in Howe's belief, with fifth-century India's Bhartrhari, that "grammar leads to God." She asks, "If there is no sacred text can language still be trusted to have an original gust of justice forming it, a virtuous grammar embedded in it, better meanings hidden in the white lines?" If so, believers are obliged to speak with great care: the truth of language has a supreme guarantor, and even the word "God" should be uttered with skepticism. Therefore, one does not answer questions so much as "lengthen the resonance of those questions." Therefore, one keeps tinkering with definitions until "I realized that [belief] simply means that you are conscious of the potential for something to become new." God, words and justice are inextricably linked. For Howe, experimental lyric is just a way to keep all avenues of communication between those terms open and bidirectional.

So what are we, if we are indeed enlightened and well adjusted, supposed to make of a woman who holds incompetence as an exemplary value; who distrusts words but uses them specifically, in the age of Richard Dawkins, to trace experience back to God; who would rather "hide out" caring for children than "get to work!" à la Linda Hirshman?

I find that Howe's essays clarify two contemporary issues. One: "The atheist is no less an inquirer than a believer," she writes. "*In living at all*, she is no less a believer than an unbeliever" (emphasis mine). Hence Camus's opening sentence in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, from 1942, is as pertinent as ever: "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." We must determine for ourselves a raison d'être; in this, as in everything else about Darwinian capitalism, we are on our own. (Howe reminds us that the sign over the gate to Buchenwald reads *Jedem das Seine*—"to each his own," or, as she clarifies, everyone gets what he deserves.) In rejecting suicide, we are all creatures of faith.

Determining for ourselves a raison d'être is also, of course, the chief prerogative of those who choose the writing life, and the second issue Howe's "Notes on a Vocation" clarifies is the role of the poet in an age of widespread scientism that peremptorily decides what questions are worth asking and how best to answer them. Quoting Johann Metz again, Howe advocates "rebellion against being partially described—be it by a science or by another person." A poet—just by persisting in that weak, useless, embarrassing role—contests authoritarian definitions of the self. Until the suave proponents of Darwinian fitness and success can solve the problem of "living at all"; until such time as they can make us—mothers, fathers, children, poets—happy to be partially described, governed by those descriptions, we cannot do without Fanny Howe and this nameless, wide-open vocation. ■

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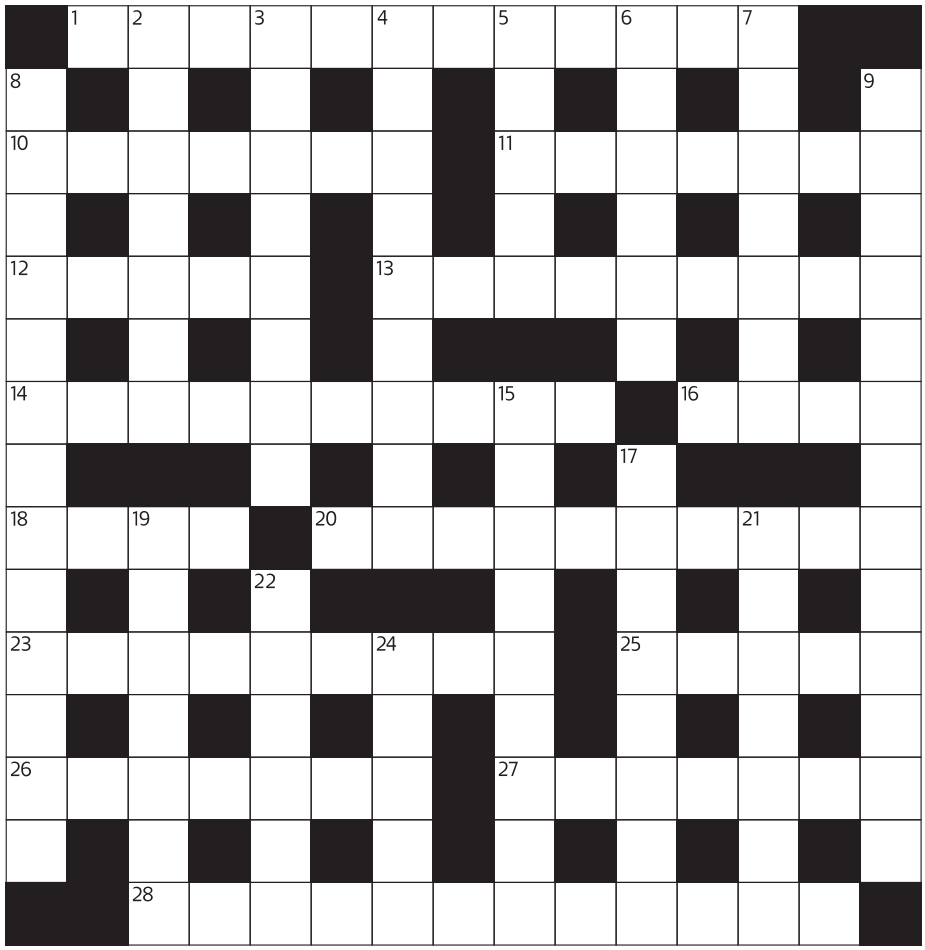

ACROSS

1 Perhaps the purpose of digging a deep hole in the ground is very good, and to be hoped for. (4-8)

10 The former spouse wasn't very good-looking evidently, to show the reason for it. (7)

11 A command to the very young? Stay with the kids! (4-3)

12 Words that 10 across school periods. (5)

13 For a vice president, he didn't leave a good impression—like the auto group started to make Mr. Reagan rub the wrong way. Right? (5,4)

14 One wouldn't want to be held this way, as one is being judged. (2,8)

16 Badly written so as to make a high point in Greece. (4)

18 Chases about aimlessly, with what might help move the cattle. (4)

20 If you do it while reading a manuscript, you don't like what you see! (4-6)

23 A nightly description. (9)

25 Condescend, as is shown by wide ignorance. (5)

26 Part of the meal is a green fruit, when the worker is around. (7)

27 Place possibly reminding one of Nathan in the musical. (7)

28 Jewel supports turtles and rattlers! (12)

DOWN

2 Rip me up, I see (I hear!)—it's anything but theoretical. (7)

3 Setting sail is no different, with illicit connections! (8)

4 Without equal, in April none would be this, when confused. (9)

5 Most of December, it might still be glowing. (5)

6 It doesn't mean to get out of bed, but you pour cold water on something, if you do. (6)

7 Talk about this! It's what you might hurl to some point. (7)

8 Possibly Mae and a Norfolk type, but more likely one from Charleston. (4,9)

9 How some ramblers go on, stretched to the ultimate. (2,5,6)

15 Kept something from happening. (9)

17 Sell something, and in Paris one who is often a graduate student, though short, will cause a private fight. (8)

19 Made of the French type, and bemoaned and denounced the result. (7)

21 One who once lived at the mouth of the Columbia River gets to talk in common fashion, with nothing acceptable. (7)

22 I have found it! It's in California! (6)

24 It ain't true! Possibly soon it will be placed around the junction! (3,2)

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I	N	D	I	G	E	N	T	■	P	O	T	T	E	R
N	■	E	■	A	■	U	■	■	■	C	■	O	■	A
D	I	V	I	S	O	R	■	P	L	A	Y	P	E	N
I	■	E	■	M	■	S	■	R	■	R	■	S	■	D
C	O	L	L	A	T	E	■	O	R	I	N	O	C	O
T	■	O	■	I	■	R	■	C	■	N	■	F	■	M
■	■	P	E	N	N	Y	D	R	E	A	D	F	U	L
O	■	■	■	■	■	R	■	A	■	■	■	■	■	Y
B	R	E	A	K	T	H	E	S	P	E	L	L	■	■
S	■	L	■	E	■	Y	■	T	■	N	■	O	■	C
T	H	E	O	R	E	M	■	I	N	V	E	I	G	H
A	■	V	■	A	■	E	■	N	■	E	■	T	■	A
C	R	E	A	T	E	S	■	A	L	L	Y	E	A	R
L	■	N	■	I	■	■	■	T	■	O	■	R	■	T
E	A	S	I	N	G	■	T	E	M	P	E	S	T	S

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